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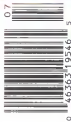
AMAZING[®]

STORIES



F. M. Busby
Larry Tritten
Kent Patterson

Rick Shelley
Paul Cook
N. Lee Wood



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Contents



9



38

WHY DID IT HAVE TO END?

- 4 Kim Mohan

REFLECTIONS

- 5 Robert Silverberg



50

FICTION

- 9 The Implanted Man by F. M. Busby
- 29 Year of the Guns—Part Two by Rick Shelley
- 35 Epitaph for Earth Magic by Robert Hodge
- 38 Necessity Is the Mother of Invention . . . by Larry Tritten
- 46 The Character Assassin by Paul Cook
- 50 The Bard Effect by Bridget McKenna
- 53 The Most Famous SF Writer on the Planet Isknif by Mike Curry
- 60 Divinity School by Kent Patterson
- 84 In the Land of No by N. Lee Wood



53



46



84

NONFICTION

- 7 Letters**
- 70 The Pollution of Space** by Isaac Asimov and Frederik Pohl
- 74 Under Twin Suns** by Stephen L. Gillett
- 78 Book Reviews** by John Gregory Betancourt, Charles Von Rospach, and John C. Bunnell
- Madlands by K. W. Jeter
Black Cocktail by Jonathan Carroll
Writer's Chapbook Series from Pulphouse Publishing
Halo by Tom Maddox
Mirabile by Janet Kagan
Winds of Fate by Mercedes Lackey
Full Spectrum 3 edited by Lou Aronica, Amy Stout, and Betsy Mitchell
The Elvenbane by Andre Norton and Mercedes Lackey
Playgrounds of the Mind by Larry Niven
- 95 About the Authors**

LOOKING FORWARD

- 63 The Road to Ehvenor** by Joel Rosenberg
- 67 Hour of the Scorpion** by Matthew J. Costello



Cover Art by Ron Walotsky



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Why Did It Have to End?

Kim Mohan

It wouldn't be wholly inaccurate to say that the high point of my weekend at Worldcon occurred before I got to the convention.

We had just arrived in town and deposited our luggage in the hotel room, and Pamela and I decided that before we plunged into the convention crowd across the street at the Hyatt, we would stop off in the Swissotel lounge for a short bit of take-a-deep-breath relaxation. I walked into the dimly lit room and saw only two other people inside. One of them looked *real* familiar.

So I kept walking, over to where he was sitting. I bent over slightly and said, "Bob? I'm Kim."

Just after the "Bob" came out, I thought I saw a flicker of a who-the-hell-is-this expression cross his face. Then Mr. Silverberg realized who was talking to him, and my convention was off to a great start. We sat down with Bob and his wife Karen Haber and had a wonderfully quiet, wonderfully pleasant conversation. The one person I most wanted to meet, the one writer who has done more for AMAZING* Stories in the last ten years than any other individual—and I was lucky enough to run into him in a place where, far from the maddening crowd, we could get to know each other a little without having to shout to be heard over the hub and the bub.

But it wouldn't really be fair to call that the only high point of the convention for me. It was just the beginning—the start of a five-day

weekend during which the high points came in rapid succession. I met dozens of people, in encounters that ranged from a smile and a handshake to an hour or more across a table or over a meal. I showed off the magazine to writers, artists, and publishing people who hadn't seen the new-format version yet. I made some friends, and I influenced some people. From start to finish, I had the time of my life.

I was a living, breathing example of Newton's First Law. I set myself in motion and remained in motion until acted upon by an outside force—in other words, someone I wanted to stop and talk to.

I would have gone home disappointed if I had not run into Phil Jennings, who seems a lot more reserved in person than he does on paper. It was great to meet Greg Benford, both for the pleasure of the event and because I was carrying a set of contracts to buy a story from him. We sealed the deal, and you'll see the story next month.

I met all four of the Haldemans: Jack, who had a story in the October issue; his wife Vol, who's had stories in these pages before and I hope will appear here again; Joe, who won a Hugo; and his wife Gay, who *would* have won one if there had been a category for Friendliest Person.

I discovered that, despite everything they have accomplished as writers, publishers, and editors, Dean Wesley Smith and Kristine Kathryn Rusch are not clones in

multiple bodies; they are just two people, and very engaging people at that. But now I'm convinced that they must have discovered a way to get by on about ten minutes of sleep a night . . . and I *want* that secret.

On consecutive days I had lunch with two of the patriarchs of science fiction. I could have listened to Julius Schwartz for hours, but I settled for an hour and a half, during which he regaled me with one story after another. When it was over, I realized I had forgotten all about finishing my salad. Kelly Freas, who painted the cover of our August issue, is also a joy to listen to—and to look at, because after more than forty years as an illustrator, the gleam in his eye is still as bright as ever.

It was a weekend full of happy accidents, above and beyond the one that started it all. I ran into Rob Chilson while we were both browsing the art show; met Lawrence Watt-Evans in an elevator; had a chance to talk to Gene DeWeese because we ended up next to each other in the registration line.

On Thursday, Bob warned me that "these things have a way of wearing you down" (or words to that effect). Maybe after I've been to a few more Worldcons, I'll know what he meant. But when I headed away from Chicago on Monday, I was more pumped up than I had been when I arrived. I didn't want it to end. And already I can't wait for next year. If I do end up worn down, I can't think of a better way to do it. ♦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

I don't just like to talk. . . . I also listen, sometimes. These are some of the things I've been hearing from the readers of this column lately:

In the September issue I ascribed the famous line about how the universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we *can* imagine, to the British astronomer Sir James Jeans. Gregory Benford points out that it was in fact the British geneticist J.B.S. Haldane who said it.

Matter of fact, I had my own doubts about whether the phrase really belonged to Jeans—doubts which grew more intense when I checked a couple of Jeans's own books, hoping that the line would spring into view, and couldn't find it. Two dictionaries of quotations that I keep around the house for awkward moments like that were no help either. And when I rummaged through a few of Arthur C. Clarke's books on speculative thought, knowing that Clarke is fond of quoting that bit, I didn't come upon it when I followed up the entries for "Jeans" in the indexes.

But deadlines are deadlines, the thought was a relevant one, and I knew that if I had the wrong attribution, somebody like Greg Benford would be sure to point it out to me—which he did, reasonably tactfully, at the World Science Fiction Convention a week or two after the column was published.

I also suspected that I wasn't

quoting the line exactly, which is why I didn't put it in quotation marks. What Haldane actually said—and which has come to take on something of a different meaning since he said it in *Possible Worlds* in 1927, which is why I didn't want to quote it that way without a source more reliable than my own memory—was, "Now, my suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose."

In the May issue, the first of the large-size slick-paper ones, I introduced the change in format with a capsule history of AMAZING® Stories' sixty-five years of publication. The period from the early 1960s to the early 1980s got very short shrift indeed: what I said was, "There were many other ups and downs in the years that followed—some glorious moments under the editorship of Cele Goldsmith in the early 1960s, some dismal ones later on when Ziff-Davis sold the magazine and its editorial budget was slashed to next to nothing. . . ."

There were indeed some glorious moments even during that difficult time in AMAZING's long history. But not all of them can be credited to that fine editor, Cele Goldsmith. A letter from Steve Davidson, published in the August issue, observes that I "did neglect to mention by name Ted White, without whom there would have been no AMAZING to revive, or even for TSR to pur-

chase." And a month later long-time reader Richard A. Moore makes the same point: "Robert Silverberg gives a history of the magazine in his column but skips over the 10-year reign of Ted White. Some of the finest fiction in the history of the magazine was published during his years."

Apologies are *really* in order here. Anybody in a hurry can confuse a couple of British scientists whom Arthur Clarke frequently likes to quote; but there's no excuse for my having left Ted White out of the roster of AMAZING's notable editors. He held the job for a solid decade—from the March 1969 issue to that of February 1979—and his tenure as editor was a distinguished one indeed. A random batch of White-edited issues of AMAZING Stories shows the publication of novels by Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Lathe of Heaven*), Philip K. Dick (*A. Lincoln, Simulacrum*) and Jack Vance (*Marune: Alastor 933*). He serialized a couple of Silverberg novels too—*Up the Line* and *The Second Trip*—and I see shorter material in these issues by the likes of Joe Haldeman, Bob Shaw, Harlan Ellison, George R.R. Martin, Charles Sheffield, and James Tiptree, Jr. All that in just a dozen or so of the issues he published over those years.

The Ted White era was, in fact, a golden age for AMAZING Stories. It wasn't personal animosity that caused me to leave his name out: Ted and I have been good friends for more than thirty years. It was simple forgetfulness—all the more

embarrassing because it was in part at my recommendation that Ted White was offered the job as editor in the first place, more than twenty years ago!

My historical essay also brings me some grief from sharp-eyed readers over matters of magazine titles:

Steve Davidson, in the course of reminding me about Ted White, goes on to say that I also got my magazine names wrong: "AMAZING's companion was *Fantastic*, not *Fantastic Adventures*."

Not guilty, Steve. Both are correct. *Fantastic Adventures* was AMAZING's companion from 1939 to 1953, in the old pulp-magazine days. That was indeed the magazine I was referring to in my column. *FA*, as we called it back then, was killed off with its March 1953 issue. *Fantastic*, a completely different entity with a totally different format (digest-size) and editorial policy, appeared on the newsstands from mid-1952 until October 1980.

On the other side of things, the esteemed scholar and bibliographer Mike Ashley slaps me lightly on the wrist for saying that Hugo Gernsback's first magazine was called *Modern Electronics* when it was in fact *Modern Electrics*. Mea culpa, mea culpa, me culpa, Mike. My fingers blithely typed "electronics" even though my brain was aware that that word didn't enter our language until the time of World War II—whereas Gernsback's pioneering technical magazine commenced publication somewhere around 1908.

I just do these little things to keep you on your toes, fellows. And to make sure that someone's really reading these columns.

Finally, from Carl Darden, who describes himself as the author of "Foxfire 5," comes a letter covering a variety of points, but mainly taking issue with my notion (in the March 1991 issue) that the democratic reforms in the Soviet Union might well lead to a reduction or redirection of the American military budget. (That column was written, of course, well before the tumultuous collapse of the Evil Empire last summer.)

Mr. Darden—a lonely voice crying in the wilderness—asserts that we are not at all on the threshold of a new era of peace and good will: "In reality," he insists, "we are now closer to global thermonuclear war than we ever have [been] since the development of nuclear weapons. . . . Russia is more vulnerable than she ever has been to outside conquest. I think even Red China at this moment could move in and take control of Moscow in 72 hours without much organized resistance. It could happen. The idea of reducing our military further is pure folly."

Well, maybe, Mr. Darden. A blizzard might descend on Los Angeles on a summer afternoon, too. But it isn't very likely, nor, I think, is a Chinese invasion of Moscow. A glance at the map will reveal that the Chinese legions would have a

long way to go to get to Red Square, and I suspect, given Russia's record of resisting invaders (cf. Napoleon, Hitler) that they'd encounter a hard time en route regardless of the present political situation in the Soviet Union. Nor do I see any special reason why China or anyone else would want to conquer the U.S.S.R. just now, and a lot of reasons for staying away. My guess is that we could safely reduce our military budget by quite a few billions without running any serious risks—though I'm not in favor, please note, of beating all our swords into plowshares just yet.

This is a chaotic time, and the breakup of the Soviet Union may indeed produce some unhappy geopolitical consequences before all the dust settles. But imminent thermonuclear war? No, Mr. Darden, not visible in my crystal ball. ♦



Letters

I'd like to comment on the two reviews you gave Orson Scott Card's *Xenocide* in the August 1991 issue. Just about everything your reviewer mentioned was accurate in that the book was well written and the characters seemed real and that it was probably going straight to the top of the awards lists for next year. (Actually, the way things are set up, he'll take both the Nebula and the Hugo award—sort of the George Bush of the science fiction field in 1992. There is no real way he can lose.)

But your reviewer left out one important aspect of *Xenocide* which was quite plain to me ten pages into the book: For all its alleged merits, the book is just no fun at all to read. Mr. Card has for years now traded his "sense of wonder" (if he ever had it) for a kind of High Literary Seriousness. And that's what *Xenocide* is: A *Very Serious* science fiction book. This is the reason (and the only reason) he'll win the Big Two next year. Science fiction has always searched—rather desperately at times—for a kind of legitimacy in the eyes of the rest of the literary world and Mr. Card has figured out that in order to get the respect (and attention) of that world, he must show that he is writing *literature* where the eternal verities of the human heart are depicted.

In fact, I could not finish *Xenocide* because of this (as I could not finish *Speaker for the Dead* for the same reason). Mr. Card has learned from his reading of Frank Herbert and Robert Heinlein how to write characters who do not speak as much as they pontificate or deliver homilies. His characters have no real emotional life, only intellectual ones. Mr. Card is also notorious for his genius children who speak with the emotional maturity and speech dictional patterns of forty-year-old adults (which is, curiously, what Mr. Card is—a forty-year-old adult). But that's a topic for a Ph.D. dissertation—which I'm sure someone is writing even as we speak.

Please don't misunderstand: I don't

hedge your critics their right to state things the way they see them, but this profound literary ambition of Mr. Card has blinded most of his critics to the utter lack of joy in his writing. It's like reading the New Testament, with the lessons all laid out for us. (Certainly his main characters are Christ-figures—Ender, Alvin Maker, *et. al.*)

I heard once that someone called Lucius Shepard the field's Joseph Conrad (for his dark introspection, lyrical prose, and labyrinthine plots). If Mr. Shepard is our Joseph Conrad, I suggest that Mr. Card is our Henry James: a capable, energetic, and influential writer; and one who is totally devoted to his own ambition. I have no doubt he'll get to the top. I wish him well. But he'll get there without my patronage. (I'd rather read the Bible.)

Joel Wyatt
New York NY

Issue number 1 of your new format had no less than what I would call three fantasy stories and one science fiction/fantasy tale. What does this tell me? You're giving fantasy as much attention as you're giving science fiction. I won't ask for more. In fact, keep a high number of fantasy stories in each volume, and I'll keep coming back for more.

I disagree with your statement (in the June issue) that "what we produce is not a necessity," by the way. Fantasy is myth, and man always will be in need of myths to live by. He always has needed and always will need science too if he's going to be different from the animals. And the best way of presenting the two to the people is through tales. Perhaps that's why the fantasy and science fiction fields are such viable markets today.

I am happy to see you devoting six pages of every issue to book reviews. However, I don't like the "Looking Forward" feature. When I start a novel, I

want the whole thing in my hands right now so I can enjoy it. Anything else is frustrating.

R. Wayne Davis
Laurence KS

Wayne's comment about the number of fantasy stories in the magazine is interesting, because so far we've made no attempt to categorize stories by subgenre in order to achieve a certain desired ratio of fantasy to science fiction. In fact, there is no desired ratio—without going back and counting them, I couldn't tell you how many fantasy stories and how many sf stories we used in a certain issue. We're trying to fill up each magazine with good stories, without paying special attention to what category each one belongs in. Judging by Wayne's reaction, we're achieving our goal by publishing a mixture of fiction that has something in it to please everyone.

In your June issue, you asked for comments on your new magazine. In the four issues I've received, I've already got many comments for you.

First of all, I would like to compliment some of your authors, who wrote exceptional stories. J. Andrew Keith's "Rendezvous with Death" was great! One of my friends decided to subscribe to your magazine because of his story. Another good story was "The Last Rothchild," and my compliments go out to Mr. Pearlman. Mr. Brunner's "Klept" and Mr. Silverberg's "A Tip on a Turtle" were both very good.

I fear that the second issue was not quite as good. Timothy Zahn's story "Hitmen—See Murderers" and Greg Costikyan's "After the War" were exceptions. Adrian Phoenix's "The Hand that Snaps the Lock Shut" was extremely disappointing after the quality of your other stories. No doubt she is a good author, as the writing itself was good. But

the story was bad. The profanity and subject matter was awful. When I was done, I was left wondering what the story was about. Sometimes profanity is okay, but not in this case, where it seemed to be used simply to have profanity in the story.

Also, most of the art is good, such as Doug Anderson's painting for "Rendezvous with Death." Again, the art, along with most of the stories in the June issue, were depressing. No colors, and abstract.

The editors are great, and I hope you can keep them up. Mr. Silverberg's "Reflections" is also very good, and I hope you keep that column as well. Mr. Silverberg's comments and information are interesting, and never before had I realized how many sci-fi books I read were published by Don Wollheim. Indeed, I'd never heard of him!

All in all, it is a good magazine, and I like it. The good definitely outnumbers the bad. I look forward to getting my next issue. Oh, also, I liked the Star of David at the end of "The Last Rothschild" as opposed to the diamond. Nice touch.

Patrick E. Baroco, Jr.
Centerville VA

I've just recently discovered your "new version." After reading the first issue I decided to try #2. I haven't gotten to #3 yet but I surely will as there's been an improvement from 1 to 2.

Advantages/likes (no particular order):

1) Size. Digest sizes have their place (bed, bathroom), but I'm the type that can't eat without reading. Your size is perfect for this.

2) Length of stories. Just the right length. To me, magazine stories/articles should be done in one sitting (meal). Yours are just right.

3) Type/style of stories. So far the stories have been entertaining, easy to understand/follow and imaginative. It seems the stories turning up in your competition are getting harder to understand. I've tested in the 95% I.Q. wise so if I can't fathom a story not many people can.

4) Book reviews. I'm always looking for new authors and ideas of what stories they write. You seem to cover a wide range which is always welcome.

5) Excerpts. Excellent idea. There's nothing more frustrating than buying a book and finding it absolutely unreadable. Even authors you've read before aren't necessarily safe. Example: Greg Bear's *Forge of God* is excellent, one of my favorite books. *Queen of Angels*, on

the other hand, is so difficult to read I quit after the first 50 or so pages. If I'd been able to read an excerpt I could've saved myself some money.

6) Artwork. A very important part of any magazine but one that is usually overlooked. Your choice of artwork is right on the money. It ties directly into the story. Too many times (in other magazines) the artwork has little if anything to do with the story. Also yours is quite detailed rather than rough sketches.

7) Advertising, rather the lack of. I realize that advertising is necessary, and there is some that I actually seek out, mainly ads for upcoming books, cons, etc. I don't care for ads for charge cards, chess games (i.e. for Trek etc. Franklin Mint style), computers, trade schools, etc. Also I hate "reply cards."

Dislikes (no particular order):

1) In issue #2 you jumped in the middle of your "What We're Up to" article from page 4 to 95. This is one of the most, if not the most, frustrating things a magazine can do. Right in the middle of a sentence you have to break concentration and go tracking the rest of the story.

So far that's it. Score 7-1. Pretty good, I'd say. I'll be looking forward to future issues of your magazine.

David Kiveragas
Clarke Summit PA

Comments on the August issue.

The Zebrowski stories would have been fine had I never heard of the notion of alternate histories. As it was, I kept waiting for him to do something with the idea. He never did. This is self-indulgence of a low order. The only thing notable in these two stories is the name of the gadget itself. Cliometricron.

As for "Logos," I detect this cutesy self-referential "fiction." Navel staring makes me cross-eyed. The rest of the fiction was competent or better. If you, like me, enjoy fiction with a sardonic edge to it, you could not ask for more than the Maxstadt tale ("The Glory of War"). Thank you.

As to the excerpts: both were readable, and I have no complaints about this. But what sort of philosophy is behind them?

A) We want to use this feature to attract new readers, readers who enjoy Anne McCaffrey or Piers Anthony or Isaac Asimov or Arthur Clarke. Therefore we will run excerpts from the books of famous authors in an attempt to attract new readers.

B) We want to use this feature to display the work of new or inconspicuous

authors who might not get the exposure they need.

Of the two philosophies, I prefer B. So far, except for the July issue, you have chosen the A route. I'm dubious. How are the fans of Anthony, McCaffrey, etc. going to know about this feature unless they are already reading the magazine? I vote for more excerpts from new or relatively unknown authors. I am strongly in favor of the feature itself.

I thought your editorial this time was amusing. However, it gave the impression that stories that come with cover letters have the edge on those that don't (assuming the letter is not completely witless). If this is so, a lot of people, including yours truly, are in some difficulty. Surely the effort should go into writing a good story, not into cover letters.

The book review section is excellent.

If Mr. Gillett can keep it up, I think you should offer him a job as a science columnist. If not, how about a Gillett article every other issue, with the balance being, say, literary articles. Some years ago, Howard Browne wrote a reminiscence of his editing days at AMAZING that was just wonderful. I would like to see more of these.

For my money, you are putting out a good magazine. I hope a lot of people agree with me to the extent of buying it.

Greg Koster
Tacoma WA

The philosophy behind our selection of excerpts for the "Looking Forward" feature closely resembles the method by which we choose stories. We're after high-quality material; the genre of the material and the status of the author who wrote it are secondary considerations. If you keep track the way Greg has done, over the course of time you'll find some A's and some B's, and maybe some C's (what ever those might be). All we're really trying to do is preview a couple of soon-to-be-published books every month with excerpts that we hope are intriguing and informative.

Sorry if anyone got the wrong idea from that column. We don't give special consideration to manuscripts that are accompanied by cover letters, but we do appreciate finding out something about the person who wrote the story, particularly if that person's background or credentials are relevant to the work.

In case it hasn't become obvious, Steve Gillett is indeed our regular science columnist, he's writing articles faster than we can get them into print. But we also do plan to use some of what Greg calls "literary articles," about which more news will be forthcoming soon. ♦

The Implanted Man

FILM REVIEW



Illustration by Mark Sküllerud

Unconscious, the man lay. After disconnecting all the tubes and wires, the doctor left the room. Three people stayed. The woman said, "You don't think he'll be too confused?"

The bigger man shrugged; the other said, "Shouldn't he. We all sensed the briefing tapes; Holtzman did his usual fine job."

The big one cleared his throat. "Especially the triggers, to choose dominance when options diverge. The ambiguities are minimal."

The shorter man nodded. "In that case we can hardly lose."

Nodding toward the silent, recumbent form the woman said, "But he can. Well, that's the risk he's paid for, isn't it?"

I

As the lifting starship plowed up through air, shuddering vibration woke Calgrave. Without understanding, he accepted it; this wasn't the first time he'd started a mission blanked, and with luck it wouldn't be the last. Frowning, trying to get some memories on track, he sat up. His face itched; absently he scratched it, but the itch was under the skin where nails couldn't reach. With a shrug he reached to the bunkside console and punched for coffee. Black, no sugar.

Sipping, he thought back a little. After a month's leave, following the successful Go/No-Go mission, he'd reported in to Sjodin. As usual, that cheery-visaged Norski had arranged to wipe all details of their talk from Calgrave's conscious recalls; the agent would have the taped, edited briefing to work from, and that was all. Well, no hurry; whatever his job was, the ship would need a week or two to get him to it.

Unless—he paused—unless the job were *on* the ship. He waited, but the thought triggered no response. So it wasn't valid; again he shrugged.

The coffee tasted odd; nothing wrong, just different. Not totally unfamiliar, though; he'd tasted it—*when?* Oh, sure; the time he and his first wife Gloria rode the ship to—

—but he'd never married anyone named Gloria. So why could his mind's eye see her, the slim blond woman with the exquisite cheekbones and . . . ?

Now hold it! But it wouldn't hold; it came up to consciousness, his time with Gloria; all the joy and then the endless-seeming pain, before he'd adjusted to losing her.

Except, none of that had ever happened to Brian Calgrave. To whom, then? A trigger told him; it had happened to Mark Dettering.

And so had a lot of other things. Now that the unique coffee (planted on him for just this purpose?) had triggered the first anomaly, some of the rest came through. Not in detail, not yet. But it would; Sjodin's programming always did.

After the brief flicker, though, the Dettering recalls submerged again.

In Calgrave's work he knew about mental implants because he had to. First developed by the military: "Imprint a POW with the memories and attitudes of one of our best agents. Suppress the POW's personality and motivations—use him as a memory bank, full of our own agent's motives souped up to the point of fanaticism. Then include him in a prisoner exchange. Presto—instant, perfectly disguised infiltrator. And totally expendable, trigger-set to avoid exposure. By self-destructing."

The speaker had shrugged; Calgrave remembered that it looked good on her. "Not physical suicide; the *implant* dissolves, along with all memory of its activity, and can't be detected. All that's left is this poor silly returned POW with *no* idea why he's in one helluva jam in his own home country." Rough on the help, yes. But wasn't everything?

Later the concept was used in more sophisticated ways, some allowing the host mind to retain memory of the experience. The techniques leaked out, of course. And if you could afford them, they offered some interesting possibilities.

Seamus Hagen, very wealthy, wanted to climb a mountain; he also wanted to kill a Sharmal Dragon in fair combat. He was too old, too fat, and too cowardly to do either.

But he could hire someone to climb that mountain, and himself take the mental implant of the experience. Subjectively, then, for the rest of his life he had done it: felt the triumph, satisfied the urge. Well worth the cost.

A further refinement: before Fane Chalmer fought the Sharmal Dragon she was implanted with the life-memories of Seamus Hagen. A problem there, because the cowardice came through also; some delicate juggling was needed before Chalmer could face the Dragon at all. Three years later she was still bitching about it: "They said they erased the old bastard's chicken thinking out of me, but it still shows in my reflexes."

She sued, but her contention wasn't provable. To stop the bad publicity, though, Hagen settled for half the claimed amount. Again the cost was worth it—for now, in the memory-implant from the woman, it wasn't just anybody killing that Dragon. It was *himself*, entirely in his own person. And he could keep the memory all his life.

People like Hagen were the tip of the iceberg—and the legal or semi-legal tip, at that. Behind it came the rush of bootleg implanters, selling experiences that ranged from relatively straight to unbelievably kinky. Sado, maso, drug highs—you name it, Calgrave thought, they've got it. In all aspects of life. For now, though, Brian Calgrave had no time to think through the whole catalogue.

Because—well, in his work he'd often carried temporary implants, the kind that suppressed his own consciousness until a situation triggered the implant's dissolving and allowed his own self to emerge and do the job. Or a partial, non-preemptive and impersonal, containing skills he needed temporarily but had no time to

acquire in the normal way. Now and then he'd "donated" some of his own skills, on laserhead, to aid in someone else's mission. In those cases he'd never known the details and didn't care to; the process was no more personal than a voice recording.

Well and good. Except why, right now, did he have both his own memories and some of Mark Dettering's?

The thought scared him. Then it scared him a lot more, because suddenly his awareness dimmed to nearly nothing and

> > >

all right, why'd they load this Calgrave character on my back? Mark Dettering knew his job. Not that he'd let himself think about it consciously just now, in case the rumors of shipboard telepathy machines had substance. But whatever his current task turned out to be when the situational triggers released his briefing for him, for sure and certain he didn't need any Fancy Dan negotiating genius to help him do it.

He'd worked with implants before—both ways, same as Calgrave had. But this time, he decided, somebody in the Back Office had screwed up by the numbers. The two new members of the Quadrumvirate did tend to get too fancy for their own good. . . .

His face itched. Scratching didn't help; the itch was inside. He'd noticed that before, when

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the funny thing, Calgrave thought, was that although he'd been only marginally aware while Dettering had control, now between one set of memories and the other there was no lapse, no feeling of shift. It did feel weird, though, to remember having thought from Dettering's viewpoint rather than his own. Usually with implants you had conscious knowledge of one ident only. Mostly your own, riding the memories of a personality-suppressed alter ego. Or possibly, depending on mission requirements, for a time you truly thought yourself to be the implanted identity. Either way, though, there was no subjective confusion.

This time was different: he could, he felt, tilt himself into "being" either Calgrave or Dettering. There was no discontinuity of personhood; both ways he remembered as *himself*. It took a little getting used to.

Finally he found a mental picture that worked: a man riding two horses, standing with one foot on each. Visualizing, he closed his eyes and achieved, for the moment, a balance. Then he could think about his problem.

He couldn't do much else, though. Any real distractions, and his feet slipped.

His horses were quiet now; he could think, at least. All right; first he'd assumed that he was Calgrave with Dettering's memories superimposed. Now he wasn't so sure; it might be better the other way 'round. Which, of course, would make a considerable difference. But this wasn't the time to worry about *that* problem.

Appearances. The two men had never met; from neither side could he recall whether one had seen pictures of the other. So he visualized each from the person's own viewpoint and then—tricky!—brought them into side-by-side comparison.

The hell of it was, they were so similar that strangers or casual acquaintances might mistake one for the other. Not twinlike, just close. Height, coloring, age, build, facial type—all of it. Calgrave wore his hair longer, but a hand exploring the head now indicated a shorter cut. So how . . . ?

With the Mayo rehealing process in common usage, "scars or other identifying marks" was no longer much of a tool for ID purposes. And he assumed Dettering's fillings were as nondetectable as his own.

Involuntarily the man laughed. Had he overlooked an easier answer? From a pocket he brought out his ID, opened his eyes and looked at it. And laughed again. Because the name on it was Ross Nicolai, and while the picture could be mistaken for either Calgrave or Dettering, it wasn't either one of them.

Ridiculous! Two look-alikes he could accept, but three were too many. Abruptly he switched the inactive intercom screen to its mirror function, and looked.

And looked. Sure as gravity, it was the Nicolai face he saw there. And now again it itched, spurring him to more useless scratching before memory (whose? both?) gave the answer. Plastic surgery, Quickheal to bring the swelling down; hell, yes!

With that thought the itch stopped. Another trigger? Somebody was getting pretty fancy!

He turned the mirror off; time to think some more. All right; a psych-trigger flashed the info that Ross Nicolai was the cover-ID for this mission, unless . . . But he'd already guessed as much, plus the contingencies that could negate the cover.

Let's get on with it.

So. Was he Calgrave with a surrogate-Dettering aboard, or vice versa? Or could *both* his memory-sets be implants riding a body with its own personality suppressed? Possibly, though not at all necessarily, a body originally named Ross Nicolai?

He shook his head; at this point none of the answers made sense. He was about to try for more briefing-triggers, to fish for some of the info taped into his (whose?) head, but at the cabin's door a knock came. He stood and opened it, almost recognizing the man who said "You're done!" and then fired a gun at him. His involuntary shove of the door struck the weapon aside; the shot missed, but the next one couldn't. . . .

One of the horses bucked; the rider hadn't realized he carried a hideout gun until its green-violet hiss turned the left side of the intruder's head to glowing charcoal.

Before that, though, the face had been Ross Nicolai's.

II

Somewhere Dettering had gone to cover, leaving Brian Calgrave to fight nausea and cope with the mess. Auto-

matically he pulled the corpse inside, found the man's ID and looked at it: Ross Nicolai. Calgrave checked the folder against his own; near as he could tell, the two were identical. He stashed the telltale item in his luggage, in a compartment no Customs inspector had ever detected, then compared the dead man's fingerprints with his own. No similarity, or not much. Memory gave no clue to the print-characteristics of Calgrave or Dettering. *Why?* No way of knowing. He thought of charring the dead fingers, but that way lay inevitable suspicion; better to take the chance their message would be innocuous.

So he reopened the door, checked to find the corridor empty, put the corpse back where it had fallen, and called for help.

The Purser-provost was puzzled but sympathetic. After all, the assailant's gun lay there, presumably carrying his own fingerprints—one more point in favor of leaving the dead hands intact. That gun Jouled twice the power of the one Calgrave had used and now turned in as evidence. Knowing of course that he'd have others hidden, so he could spare this one.

Scowling, though not in anger, the Purser-provost looked down to Calgrave. A tall woman, graceful and quiet in movement, she made a polite request to use the intercom, into which she spoke in a language unknown to Calgrave. She was querying, though; the intonations were unmistakable.

Eventually she shut the gadget off, and nodded. "On our passenger list, sir, the man is not. For fully accounted that list is, and all alive. Who he was, how he got here, no data tells. Nor what he wanted."

Clearing his throat, Calgrave said, "The latter, I'd think, seems obvious."

"Yes. To react so quickly, sir, lucky you were." She paused, and, as two helpers bundled the corpse into a blanket, added, "Informed, sir, I shall keep you."

"Good. I thank you, Provost." Then they were gone, the cabin door closed again. Calgrave poured himself a short, stiff drink and sat on his bunk to sip it.

A few things needed thinking about.

For starters, two Ross Nicolais when perhaps not even one had really existed: Calgrave felt a surge of unexpected amusement. It wasn't his. *Are you down there someplace, Dettering?*

No response. He shrugged; if the problem were all his, so be it. What bothered him was the very real possibility that the two Nicolais had actually been Brian Calgrave and Mark Dettering. But if so, which was which? He had no idea. Nor why Sjodin, on behalf of The Group, would set up such an insane mess.

> > >

Who says it has to be Sjodin? Dettering considered the depths of pragmatism the Back Office might plumb. If his employers had limits in that respect, he couldn't think of any. Especially if the mission originated with the Quadrumvirate itself.

But this business of two agents wearing the same ident, and one primed to kill the other before the mission even began? Dettering shook his head, fell to musing. . . .

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Calgrave didn't know much, and hadn't wanted to, about the outfit Dettering worked for. Now, though, maybe he needed that knowledge. He concentrated on the flash Dettering had just given. . . .

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Thinking of Calgrave's queasy stomach when he dragged the "Nicolai" corpse into the cabin, Dettering laughed. Maybe not so funny, though, if Calgrave happened to be in the saddle when the mission hit flash point. Even a split-second delay—well, there had to be ways to avoid that problem. . . .

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Calgrave sipped. The small glass was nearly full; Dettering must not be much of a drinker. Good stuff, too; for a moment he savored the rich, strong taste, then narrowed his concentration. All right: whatever the mission turned out to be, once the ship got wherever it was going (with the Provost, he'd been too rattled to think how to ask its destination), the job would require either his talents or Dettering's but hardly both. It would be nice, he thought, to know which.

For Brian Calgrave specialized in the maneuvering of persons and political entities; his tools were knowledge, charm, intelligence, and a superbly flexible sense of ethics. "When Calgrave skins you," Sjodin once said, "you appreciate his fine workmanship and thank him for doing such a painless job." Sjodin was quite a kiddier, but still Calgrave took the compliment at almost half of face value.

Dettering, though, was in a different line of work. What he did best was what he'd done not too many minutes ago: kill. So on any normal mission their two skills weren't likely to be compatible or even complementary. Well, the double-implant setup, if that's what it was, knocked "normal" out of the mission description anyway. To say the least. . . .

Dead end there—for now, anyway; what else could he try? Belatedly Calgrave realized he didn't have to ask anyone about the ship's agenda, and punched a tour readout from the intercom. The flimsy burped out, crumpling a little but not too badly; he scanned it. The date: okay, he was missing about nine days, which would be the implanting and plastic surgery and whatever other hanky-panky Sjodin had put him through. *Or, don't forget, maybe the Back Office.*

He did a double-take on that date. Sjodin, the sumbitch, had either ached him out of his planned weekend with Ingrith Haede or else blanked it from his current memory package. Either way it stunk: at age twenty-two, blonde Ingrith was in full bloom. When Calgrave made

his time-dilated way home again, *if* he did, she might or might not be; FTL didn't hit you with full Lorenz-Fitzgerald time contraction, but still some leaked through. Sjodin's concern would be minimal or absent; he retarded his own aging by doing all his sleeping in stasis. Ordinary employees, including field agents, didn't have that option. Damn damn *damn*.

But what can't be cured . . . Calgrave read on. He was riding the ship *Boomerang*, on lift from Earth direct to "Portly" on Fatso. Port Lee, really, and Fatso was named for its large diameter and low density. A world short on metals, so its science and industries specialized in light organics to good effect.

Calgrave thought: *something* about that place—but he couldn't remember. Irritated, he took a bigger sip of booze than he truly wanted. Thinking that it wouldn't really kill Sjodin to give his working troops a little more of the info they'd need to do their jobs.

Sjodin was out of reach; maybe the info wasn't. But Calgrave's mental efforts to find briefing-triggers got him nowhere. Irrated even further, he drained his glass, moved to fill it but then stopped that motion.

"Dettering, we have to talk." No answer, of course; it didn't work that way. So how *would* it? Not sharing consciousness, the two personalities couldn't talk directly. But maybe . . .

The readout-flimsy was a long sheet, blank on one side; if he used it up, more was available. Calgrave wrote:

— Dettering we need each other. Answer. —

Then he thought of the moment the gun killed "Nicolai."

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Dettering read the note. Under it he wrote:

— Why? —

He thought of Calgrave's nausea at the "Nicolai" body, and grinned.

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Suppressing his gag reflex, Calgrave grimaced. And wrote:

— To sort this mess out, you trigger-happy goon! —

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Dettering gave a contemptuous snort.

— Why bother? The situational triggers will do that when the time comes. They always do.

You worried? —

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Calgrave could snort, too.

— Too true, I am. If you're not, you should be.

Aren't you wondering, just a little,
whose head you fried? —

A pause, maybe Dettering wasn't going to answer.

But

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Dettering considered the matter, chuckled, and wrote:

— Yours, I expect. —

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Quickly Calgrave scrawled:

— Or maybe yours. —

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Deliberately neat and accurate, Dettering hand-printed:

— I doubt that. I'm faster. —

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In trained skills, maybe, but few could top Calgrave's reflexes. He crumpled the flimsy: File Thirteen. Nothing happened; no switch came. So he was stuck with the puzzle all by himself.

Again he sipped—when had he or Dettering refilled the glass?—and did some thinking. About Sjodin of The Group, and about the Back Office that employed Dettering. Why would either boss saddle him and Dettering with each other? It didn't make sense.

Brooding, Calgrave found no answers. The intercom screen, suddenly lighting up, startled him. He jerked around to face it; liquid, but not very much, sloshed from his glass as on the screen he recognized a woman's face. Ingrith! Her long, smooth blonde hair was shortened, dyed black, and frizzed into bushy bulk, but . . .

"Ross! Remember me? Felizia Abrunno? Our mutual friend the Scandinavian sends greetings. Where and when, at the soonest, may I deliver them in person?"

III

Calgrave's orientation wavered. For a moment, feeling a sexual response that was not his own, he thought Dettering was taking over. That moment passed; his own racing thoughts had too much momentum to be derailed. Stalling, he said, "Hi, Felizia; good to see you. Let me think. . . ."

And *think* was the operative word. Calgrave knew Felizia; with the hairjob and makeup, Ingrith bore some resemblance but not much. Pics and other ID data would be doctored to fit, of course. But as an operative agent Abrunno's specialties included misdirection, seduction, blackmail, and mayhem, not necessarily in that order. Whereas Ingrith, he would have sworn, worked an innocent nine-to-five and had no dirty tricks training whatsoever.

So she had to be here, her true self suppressed, carrying an Abrunno implant. But why? Ruefully Calgrave thought of the implanted, expendable POWs. *DAMN Sjodin!* He started to speak

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as Dettering gave the woman an appreciative smile and said, "Right now is as good as any, Felizia. Your place or mine?" Dettering had heard about this one; if she was as good as the Back Office seemed to think, she could be useful. And meanwhile, maybe fun too.

She nodded. "I'll come there; we can take up where we left off. You do remember, don't you, Ross darling?"

The screen blanked. Dettering began to feel amused. So the woman had been lovers with Calgrave, had she? Well, now . . .

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Calgrave shook his head; Dettering had it wrong. Calgrave knew Abrunno only in line of business; off work he restricted his emotional dealings to persons *not* into tricky stuff. Such as Ingrith.

But now it wasn't Ingrith or Abrunno coming to visit or talk or whatever, with him and thus with Dettering also. It was Ingrith with a Felizia implant. Having noted Dettering's reactions toward the woman, Calgrave liked that idea not one bit.

About women in general he had no chauvinist protective ideas. But Ingrith Haede was a sunny, open person, and from what he'd sensed of Dettering's memories they showed a mean streak. Well, what other kind of man could adjust to killing as a steady job?

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It had not, thought Dettering, been easy. But he'd managed; the nightmares that plagued his earlier years were gone now. And hell, he wasn't going to hurt this woman—unless, as in the case of the mule and the two-by-four, it was the only way to get her attention. Besides, likely he wouldn't be in charge throughout; Calgrave too would have his moments.

A puzzling thought came. *He* hadn't boffed this frizzy ginch; if Calgrave hadn't either, who the hell *bad*?

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Calgrave knew that answer: *the dead man. Who else?* While he was thinking about that, the knock came. He stood to answer it, reminding himself that he'd be greeting Felizia Abrunno in the body of Ingrith Haede, who with any luck wouldn't remember being implanted. If the sequence were erased, and . . .

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if she lives through the mission, was Dettering's thought.

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As the door opened, seeing her brought Calgrave back into control. Inside, door closed again, she cried "Ross!"

and hugged him. The kiss wasn't Ingrith so it had to be Felizia.

He fixed drinks and got them both seated—all the while watching, trying to sort out the Ingrith part from the implant. Ingrith was the contours, he decided, but the responses were all Felizia Abrunno. So she was the person he had to deal with.

He asked about Sjodin's message. "Oh, that!" She laughed, not at all in Ingrith's fashion. "None, really. The name as a password, only. I thought you'd realize."

He nodded. "Sure; I'd hoped for more, was all." He paused too long, for

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Dettering looked hard at her and said, "There's fishy stuff going on. So while you're at it, validate yourself with *me*. Like a quick summary of you and me together—where, when, and what."

"I don't—" His hand waved off the stalling; Abrunno said, "All right. Who you really are doesn't matter. Ross Nicolai's a synthid; I know that much. Most wouldn't, but I have TopSec access and two months ago you didn't exist. So—"

Not harshly, his palm muffled her speech. "Stop telling me what I know. Tell what I asked you." He took his hand away.

What she did then was part shrug and part shudder. "If you don't *want* to say who you are, all right. But what you asked—"

"You and me, Abrunno. As you remember it." Second thought: "Knowing our boss, we may not have it quite the same."

Looking relieved, she nodded; the frizzed hair bounced. "Yes. Sure, Nicolai—or whoever. Sjodin called me in and you were there. He introduced us, said go take a weekend and get acquainted, handed out vouchers for travel, reservations at the Fishbowl under Tahoe." Her eyes widened. "I liked it, did you?"

"You know I did; quit fishing and get on with it. When we went back to HQ, then what?" For neither his memories, nor any he'd sensed of Calgrave's, held any of this. So maybe—

But again Felizia shook her bushy hair. "How would I know?" They sent us back on separate flights; until now I hadn't seen you again." She smiled. "Whatever this is about, now, let's take a break." She leaned toward him; as he reached for her he had to laugh at what Calgrave was going to think. But

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She wasn't really Ingrith, Calgrave thought, but she wasn't the real Felizia Abrunno, either. *Oh, what the hell!*

He followed through. With all of it. And Brian Calgrave's concentration, even to orgasm, was such that Mark Dettering got hardly a look-in.

Later he'd remember it, of course.

The one new datum, thought Calgrave, was that Ross

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Kith-kanan waved for quiet. "You have all suffered and struggled and bled for Qualinesti. So have I. Therefore, I make you this pledge: the day the fortress of Pax Tharkas is finished, I shall abdicate." The crowd roared with dismay.

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Nicolai was a synthetic identity, not a true person in any time or place. It didn't surprise him much; the opposite wouldn't have, either. And still nothing proved that the corpse was either himself or Mark Detering. Or that it wasn't. *Ob, bloody bell!*

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Which mirrored Detering's sentiments exactly. Calgrave, that sumbitch, had aced him out of all the best parts of the recent scene; remembering wasn't really the same. *Next time!* But for now, Detering had to concede, Calgrave was calling the cards pretty well.

And that calling made for worry. Because Detering didn't like it at all, not knowing if either he or Calgrave truly "owned" this body, or which of them faced the limbo of simple erasure at mission's end. Assuming either survived that long.

Surviving, though, was Detering's specialty. In some detail, now, he set to thinking about it.

IV

Behind his desk, facing the four technicians, Sjodin stood. "You say *what?*"

Half-bowing, all four nodded; the older woman spoke. "The other people, they got to him also. You know who I mean. If our information is correct, both facets have the capacity for consciousness."

Harder than he'd intended, Sjodin sat down. "So what the hell happens?"

Silence; then the bigger of the two men said, "Sir, we hoped you might know."

But Sjodin didn't.

He always hated having audience with the Chairman, and this occasion boded even worse than most. The man loomed at him, asking questions Sjodin could not answer. Slowly the Norseman let his resentment build, because that was the only way he could get up enough nerve to talk back a little. And no matter what might come of it, sometimes he needed to do that.

"Yes, Your Eminence. Yes. Yes. But—oh yes, of course. But—" He felt his blood rush. *Now!* "Your Eminence, I can not give valid answer when data are withheld from me. There is, your consent willing, an apparatus known as the Back Office. This agency, with or without Your Eminence's permission, has put unknown parameters into the mission I planned under your orders. Therefore I can not assure that matters on Fatso will proceed as intended."

Not smiling, His Eminence nodded. "Thank you, Sjodin. You may go."

No drinks today, it seemed. No cookies, cake, or coffee. Certainly no dancing-girls.

With his usual relief at getting out of that place in one piece, Sjodin left.

V

Waking, finding no memory of hanky-panky on Detering's part, Calgrave roused Felizia and sent her back to her own cubby. Much as he'd have liked to spend more time with her, he wanted to give Detering no chance to cut in. From the intercom he ordered breakfast. The screen gave acknowledgement, someone knocked and

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Detering looked around. "Who's there?"

"Purser-provost." Sure; Detering remembered the tall woman. But not her name; had Calgrave ever heard it? So Detering asked.

She said, "Oh? So, indeed. Ilge Talos, my identity. If you now are assured, may I enter?"

Judging by her tone she would anyway, so Detering let her in. Standing taller than he, Talos said, "More problems we have than I had thought." Detering let his mind relax; he didn't need more problems. . . .

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"Such as what?" said Calgrave. From below the screen his breakfast tray emerged; he took it and began eating. "Well?"

"The dead person, dead by your gun. In life, before the gunshot, much like yourself he would have looked."

"Yes, I noticed." To cut things short he said, "I have no hypothesis to account for the coincidence. Have you?"

Noncommittal look. "Your fingers prints; may I photograph?"

"Sure." She didn't seem to understand, so he added, "Yes. Go ahead," and held first one hand and then the other to the instrument she extended toward him.

Done with it, she nodded and put the gadget away at her belt. "Information I may find, shared with you will be."

"Fine; thanks." The woman left. Calgrave waited a couple of minutes before he got out the dead "Nicolai's" ID and compared its recorded printpatterns with his own. No similarity to speak of, if you looked at details. Well, why should there be? He thought further but it got him nowhere.

Except that no matter who "owned" this body, he couldn't be erased out of it if he didn't return to HQ. So until he knew the score better, he damn well wouldn't do that.

Of course Detering, next time he took over, would know of this new intention. But maybe he wouldn't be all that confident either, who was who. The uncertainty might slow the man down a little.

Calgrave took a nap.

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After an hour or so Detering woke up and got himself a sandwich. Thinking back, he nodded. Even working for

a namby-pamby bunch of so-called diplomats, Calgrave had a good hard head on him. In his own mind Dettering hadn't actualized the possibilities, but now that Calgrave had done so, Dettering thought the other man had an idea you couldn't argue with: until they knew whose hat held the rabbit, stay the hell loose from HQ.

Once they did know, of course, it would be a whole new ball game.

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A lot would depend, thought Calgrave, on which of them came up with the answers first.

She was not, Felizia decided, anywhere near as far into Top Secret matters as she'd thought she was. For instance: she knew she felt younger and healthier than she had for some years, but she had no idea why. She shrugged; if HQ wanted to zing her up a bit, why complain?

And her hunch was that Ross Nicolai had also been through some engineered changes since their Fishbowl weekend. There his responses had been consistent; now he seemed to have two sides to him, and neither was exactly the man she'd weekendend with. Well, what the f---? She knew HQ sometimes laid weird conditioning on its people for mission purposes. Until it became a problem to her, she wasn't planning to worry about it.

She did wish he'd call pretty soon, though.

The situation, Purser-provost Ilge Talos did not like at all. Two men looking greatly alike but with hands prints different. And the alive one, no question of it, had killed the other. Granted the intruder had shot first. But perhaps had he not so, never would he at all, and still be dead. In her training, this kind of logic the provost had learned. Still, for passengers to kill each other was not orderly.

But on passenger list the dead one was not found. More disorder. The Purser-provost shrugged.

When it came to ship's time, Calgrave was lost. How the hell do you keep track when somebody else is sharing your clock? He punched the intercom's time readout, then nodded. The number fit his jigsawed recalls well enough, except that by now he should be hungrier. A brief memory surfaced: Dettering had wakened from their nap and punched up a snack. Still, not too long from now Calgrave would be ready for a heftier meal.

Before that time, though, he wanted to try something. He realized his ideas on dealing with a two-minded body kept shifting and changing; so did Dettering's reactions. The limitations had to lie in both men's preconceived notions. But still there was Calgrave's earlier, helpful gimmick: the rider standing on the backs of the two horses that were his and Dettering's separate viewpoint packages.

So now he tried it again.

First he couldn't make it work; then he could. As soon as he felt himself somewhat detached from both minds, he-the-rider began, for the moment, to treat them as passive memory banks.

To maximize mental resonance he spoke aloud. "All right. I don't care what Sjodin's Group wants, or the Back Office either; I say it's time we got our mission briefings. Calgrave's and Dettering's both."

Partly, it worked: one briefing, preliminary but as much as he'd expected to spring at this point, "played" for him. And the one was all he could trigger. So, obviously it had been taped in after the implantings, to the composite individual. But if the later, situationally triggered stuff had all been put in the same way, this mission could well be a bull bitch on wheels!

Frustration toppled the precarious balance; the Dettering "horse" withdrew, leaving Calgrave with an impression of sulkiness but also with time to consider what he'd learned. In itself the briefing said little; the implications, though, could use some chewing.

When *Boomerang* landed at "Portly" the drill was to request audience with the Secretary of the Executive, who at this season of Fatso's year would be in residence locally. And . . . But that was all, every bit of the personalized material.

There was also, as usual, some background stuff. Secretary of the Executive was a euphemism for flat-out dictator—but an *elected* tyrant. Calgrave shook his head; he'd considered the lawmaking lottery on OK-Corral to be the last word in weird government, but maybe he still had a few things to learn.

For now, though: the Sec'xec had stonewall-blocked the Chairman's trade commission; regarding some intriguing new organics from Fatso's labs, Earth wasn't even getting a look-in. An urgent matter, apparently, but nature of importance not stated. The Sec'xec, it seemed, was the spoke in the wheel. *Monkey wrench in the works*, came Dettering's thought.

Whatever.

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Dettering nodded. Sure; if Calgrave couldn't unstop the works for Sjodin's Group, Dettering would do his own kind of job. It was funny

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thought Calgrave, that he and Dettering never used the real names of their respective departments. The Group, the Back Office, nothing more. Both reporting directly to Earth's Chairman. Aside from rumors, the Legislative Assembly knew nothing of either outfit.

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If it did know, Dettering thought, there would be litters of puppies all over the place. Hycena puppies.

Dettering quit thinking.

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Calgrave considered the Sec'xec: Uinta Trieg, called (behind her back) "The Moose." Product of many successive

generations born on the high-gee world Heavy Side, herself raised there past puberty, Trieg was thick and heavy in bone and muscle. Tall among her own people, on Earth she would be considerably below average height.

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But physically, thought Dettering, formidable in the extreme. Not even he, with all his lethal training, could be any kind of match for her. Calgrave—he snorted—Calgrave would last about as long as dewdrops on Venus.

With any luck at all, of course, it wouldn't come to that.

VI

Bored, finished with her drink, Felizia wanted another. She didn't make one, though, because she wasn't sure she could handle it on an empty stomach. Over years she'd built a head for booze that, without conceit, she knew to be adequate and possibly outstanding. Lately, though—since she'd last visited HQ, in fact—her internal automatic booze clock didn't work for little blue beans. Why this should be she had no idea. What she did know was that right now another drink wasn't indicated.

She checked her ship's-time chrono, a courtesy loan available to any of *Boomerang's* passengers on request. No one had to convert to the hours favored by ship's routine, but why not? And by "official" time the dining salon's dinner hour was just beginning. Had Ross Nicolai gone to ship's time? She didn't know; maybe now was a good time to find out. She punched his cabin number and waited.

When the screen lit, the pictured man was scowling. "Yeah? Oh, hi, Felizia." Quickly she asked if he'd like to join her for dinner, after a moment he smiled. "Sure thing. Only maybe you're not in a real hurry to eat just yet. Why don't I stop by your room, and we'll see?"

Before she could agree, Nicolai's expression changed to one of anxiety. "Cancel that; let's meet in the salon. Is fifteen minutes okay?" She agreed, and the screen went dark.

Now what was that all about?

As the intercom screen dimmed, Calgrave's thoughts wavered

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and Dettering felt his own grin return. He'd really shaken the dipple up, there! Sure, Calgrave was willing to huff Felizia Abrunno, no matter she was only an implant—but he sure was antsy about Dettering getting to sweet young Ingrith, even if she never knew it. How about that?

Well, too bad for Calgrave. Because sooner or later . . .

Dettering relaxed

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and let Calgrave find their way to dinner.

Felizia, Calgrave noted, was late. Seated in the salon, provided with appetizers and ice water and a Danish Martini (akvavit substituting beautifully for the vermouth), he took his time evaluating the place. Not anything special: dim, smoky blue tones dominated, with a deep-space simulation ceiling. He liked it, though; maybe he was really a tourist at heart.

The electronic multisource music helped his mood, too: dipping into subsonics just enough to stir visceral emotions but not so intense as to define them, it heightened and enriched his feelings of basic *aliveness*. He blinked

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and Dettering thought: *yeah, this isn't bad at all. If I had a job on, right now, this setup would sure as hell have me up for it.* He liked to work a little hyped, Dettering did, but drugs could get too tricky. Music, though . . .

Then Felizia entered.

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She didn't move at all like Ingrith, came Calgrave's thought. Same bones, muscles, nerves, but a totally different effect. For Ingrith he'd have stood up, but for agent Abrunno he kept his seat as she swung the pivoted chair and sat across from him. "Hi, Ross. Sorry I'm late."

"De nada." *Boomerang's* salon had live servitors, not pushbutton ordering: as a young person approached the table, Calgrave gestured. "Drinks, perhaps?"

Pausing, then she nodded. "My usual, please."

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But her pause had flicked Dettering into control, and he didn't *know* her damned "usual." Calgrave would, if only from The Group's files—and "Nicolai" would, of course—but quick memory-search gave Dettering no clue. The hell with it: making the effort he was beginning to master, Dettering abdicated.

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Calgrave blinked. "Oh, yes," and along with replenishment for his own drink and appetizers, he ordered her a Rum Clout. Personally he loathed the sweet, syrupy mixture and doubted that Ingrith would like it either. But Felizia had made the choice.

Calgrave found himself wondering whether the departing servitor were male or female. No beard, neutral features and hairstyle—and neither the loose robe nor ambling gait gave any clue. For some reason the ambiguity made him uneasy.

Without warning Dettering surfaced, stared, and said, "Genetic neuter, produced on Loki V." As he went under

again his attitude rubbed it in that the Back Office knew some things The Group didn't. Briefly shaken, Calgrave scowled.

"Something wrong?" Felizia asked.

Their order came then, so he had time to think before saying, "No. I was considering what to ask you."

She sipped the Clout first, then asked, "About what?"

"The mission. You're part of it; you have to be. I don't suppose you've triggered any briefing yet?" She shook her head; newly groomed, the frizz didn't jiggle much. Calgrave sighed. "We'll have to see if we can't spring some of it. Not until after dinner, though."

For a moment, when she smiled, he almost saw Ingrith.

After the meal they went to his cabin. All things considered, Calgrave saw no reason why the place should be bugged. Just in case, though, he decided to stick with the minimum-info approach. His guess was that another Rum Clout would dump Felizia/Ingrith on her can, so once both were inside and sitting down, for her he buttoned-out a light spritzer. Cooperatively she sipped it rather than wasting it on thirst, and gave him an attentive look.

First, looking to trigger some part of her mission briefing, he tried standard keywords; as expected, he got no response. So he experimented with mission-related words, mixing them up to mislead possible eavesdroppers. "*Boomerang*. The Norsk. Portly." Pausing between, and adding chance-thought words for further misdirection. For a moment Dettering's thought came topside—*Stir 'em, yeab*—then vanished.

But not without leaving an idea behind. Calgrave said, "Nicolai. Ross Nicolai."

And that triggered her briefing, what there was of it. Simply, on landing at Portly or perhaps earlier if indicated, Felizia was to become Nicolai's top aide and follow orders without question. "Well, hell," she said, when Calgrave nudged her out of the slight trance that accompanied debriefing. "I could have told you that." Before he could answer

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Dettering grinned. "Sure you could. But this way I know it's solid." He reached to her; after a moment's hesitation, possibly due to trance aftermath, she responded.

All the while holding grimly to his concentration, Dettering played it slow and easy. The effort, throughout, hampered his own enjoyment somewhat—but this time it was Calgrave having to get his jollies after the fact.

DAMN Dettering! It was done, though, so no use fussing. Coming awake after the brief nap, Calgrave spoke gently to the satiated Felizia. Looking, now, he saw no trace of Ingrith. Yet even suppressed by the Abrunno implant, in her own body the younger woman somehow existed. If the mission—whatever the hell *that* turned out to be—succeeded, Ingrith would be back again.

So, wondering if his decision made sense, Calgrave

said, "Felizia—until *Boomerang* lands we don't see each other. That's an order. Not to be countermanded even by me. Understand?"

She shook her head; the hair bounced freely. "No. Why?"

"Briefing," he lied. "Take it as read."

"All right, Ross." She kissed him and left.

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The door closed; Dettering said, "For the record, Calgrave, you're the chintziest prude I ever almost met!" He made the abdicating effort, but Calgrave did not surface or respond.

VII

As Dettering knew, *Boomerang*-class vessels weren't noted for soft landings. Coming at Fatso like a jettisoned bomb, the ship plowed air. No crops grew near Port Lee; the booms would have shredded them. Pilots came down with a view to least possible damage, but ships like *Boomerang* weren't designed to coexist with anything that wasn't reasonably compatible with shock waves. Riding out the jars and vibration, Dettering needed no reminder that these landings weren't so great from upstairs either.

Finally they were down; the ship rang itself to silence. Comparatively, at least: now that the drive's muffled roar had stopped, the hums of life-support and pings of cooling hardly counted. In retrospect, the recent buffeting shriek of atmosphere emphasized the contrast.

Quickly Dettering packed for debarking. Twice he paused to think back through Calgrave's times in the control-saddle, and looked to find items the other man had cached away. He shrugged—*silly games*—then grinned; after all, he'd done the same thing early on, before the situation became as clear as it was likely to get.

At the door, a knock. He stepped across the cubby and let Felizia in. "We're landed, Ross. Instructions?"

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"Just a minute." Calgrave shook his head, going to retrieve an item of his own that Dettering had overlooked. Nothing important, just some notes. To Felizia he said, "You're briefed on Portly?" and she nodded. "Then go up to Comm, grease somebody there and get through to groundside. Make reservations for us: a status-proper location and suite, reasonably convenient to Port Admin and to the Sec'xec's offices. Do you have that straight?"

"Yes, of course." She turned to leave.

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"One more thing," said Dettering. "I like a big bathtub."

The suite's full-length window wall, opaque to outside view, faced past the Admin building to the Port itself,

where *Boomerang* was both disgorging and taking cargo. From the big tub the view wasn't all that clear; in that room, some ventilation malfunction or other steamed the window.

Four bodies wouldn't have crowded that tub; with only two, Calgrave and Dettering and Ingrith and Felizia had plenty of room. Though of course Ingrith wasn't really there.

The aeration and ionization of the waters hindered Dettering's concentration. He didn't like that.



What Calgrave didn't like was the way Dettering got Felizia into games that Ingrith wouldn't have stood for. With Felizia in her own person, Calgrave would have taken no exception, Dettering or no Dettering. But Ingrith was different. Well, she had been.

Mostly, Calgrave smoldered.

Life on Fatso wasn't all games. There was the problem of meeting with The Moose—the Sec'cec, Uinta Trieg. Protocol dictated that the preliminaries be conducted by Felizia Abrunno, not Ross Nicolai. Hardly to mention Brian Calgrave or Mark Dettering, who weren't supposed to be there at all.

The second day downside, Felizia made the connection. She brought the news to Calgrave at lunch. "Tomorrow," she said. "The Sec'cec's top-floor office over in Admin. At two of their shorthanded hours after local noon." Making a face, she held her nose. "Phew! What are you eating?"

"Local food; sturdy stuff." Saturated, as a matter of fact, with garlic—which gave Dettering heartburn but didn't bother Calgrave a bit. Since they occupied the same body, Dettering's trouble had to be psychosomatic.

Calgrave didn't care either way; he needed all the edge he could get.

Uinta Trieg frowned, doubling the surprisingly short distance between her close-clipped hair and bushy eyebrows. Most humans, Trieg knew, found her ugly. Well, the ancestors of most humans hadn't been stuck, due to a particularly stupid war, on a high-gee planet, adapting painfully over several centuries. So Trieg's legs and torso were short and thick and powerful; her arms were long and thick and powerful. Her neck, what there was of it—well, if anyone tried to hang her, the noose would probably slip off over her head.

Trieg knew what most people thought of her, that they tended to overlook her keen intelligence. So long as they kept their opinions to themselves, she did not indulge her superb capacities for resentment and retaliation.

The frown was brief. To her secretary Trieg said, "This Nicolai. What does he want?"

With flaccid grace the secretary shrugged, did a quick eye-roll around its peripheral vision, then stared straight at Uinta Trieg. "A follow-up to Earth's recent trading commission? With persuasion, or perhaps pressure?"

"Pressure?" Like her slablike shoulders, Trieg's chest

was narrow but deep. From those depths, now, laughter rumbled. To her neuter employee she said, "I am as immune to pressure, Isken, as you are to lust."

The interphone chimed. "I'll take it," the Sec'cec said, and punched the Activate button; the screen showed head and shoulders of a thin-faced female. *Light gravity*, thought Trieg, saying, "Uinta Trieg here. And you?"

"Ilge Talos, Excellency. Of the ship *Boomerang*, landed most soon ago. I am Purser-provost. Information, there is."

"Information?" But how had this flunkey called *ber*? The landing—yes, long enough ago for this Talos person to work through the buffer stages and reach her directly. Well, the matter might be important.

So, Trieg's face made the learned, practiced expression that most humans found nonthreatening: her natural smile would not do at all. "Information," she said, "is always welcome."

Talos talked; seldom interrupting with questions, Trieg listened. At the end she thanked Talos and offered the woman complimentary lodging "for the duration of your stay" at a hostel no Purser-provost could likely afford. Accepting thanks in return, she cut the circuit.

Talking at the secretary rather than to it, Trieg recapped. "Two men: except for fingerprints, very similar. Self-defense or not, one killed the other. No ID on the corpse. Destroyed? Whether so or not, the survivor took that data. Why? Incriminating? If so, again why?"

The massive shrug came so fast that the secretary flinched. Trieg made a calming gesture. "No matter. The one is killed. Should there be any serious problem, the other is not immune to the same process."

She stood, adding, "Envoy or no envoy."

VIII

When the uniformed guard opened the door to the Sec'cec's office, Calgrave motioned Felizia in first. All the way over here, hoping for some kind of balanced attitude, he'd tried to set up the two-horse rider. But Dettering wasn't having any. All right; Calgrave would play things the way they came.

Moving up alongside Felizia as they approached the great desk console ahead, he had time to sort out a few impressions. Of Uinta Trieg he'd seen holograms; the reality came as a jolt but not all that much. The secretary, when Calgrave noticed it, was more of a jar; genetic neuters, it seemed, really bothered him at gut level.



Not Dettering, though. To him the neut simply lacked all valence, all personhood. Without sexuality, who was *there*? Neither did Trieg scare him—and best that he be the one to suffer the inevitable crunching handshake. He could do it without visibly wincing; Calgrave might not.

So as Felizia stepped aside, Dettering moved up and took the Sec'cec's crushing grip. His training enabled

him to keep his face blank through the grinding ordeal and to parrot the formal, stylized greetings. Freed then, surreptitiously he wiggled his fingers; no bones were broken, nor ligaments torn.

So, Dettering abdicated.

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Ignoring the way his hand hurt, Calgrave began by establishing his credentials as Ross Nicolai. Then he reviewed in outline the trade agreements that left Earth, with regard to many of Fatso's newest synthesized organics, out in the cold.

That kind of summation came automatically to Calgrave; while he gave it he noticed a few things. For one, the Sec'xec's overly busy look was illusory; her breasts, large in area but short of depth, jutted because they rode a deep chest and heavy pectoral muscles. *Onebanded, she could tear a man's arm off.* . . .

Cutting in on his reverie, Trieg said, "What business of yours, how we allot our trade? Many other worlds, not only Earth, we omit from our most-favored list. If our Council—"

Calgrave's hand pushed air. "Not your Council, madame. Yourself. On this planet you make the decisions. Not so?"

Trieg's smile, then, may not have been quite what she intended; it nearly sent Calgrave leaping out of range. Inside him, as Dettering stirred, he felt a transitory, contemptuous chuckle. Hoping Trieg hadn't noticed his startled twitch, Calgrave got himself back under control as the massive woman said, "What matters who decides? I say it to you, Nicolai." Her thick arm flailed; Calgrave held himself from flinching.

He wanted time to think; he didn't get it, because

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Dettering leaned forward. "But why? I am directed, I must tell you, to request a substantive answer: a reason the Chairman of Earth can accept as valid. Sheer whim will not do."

Top that, Calgrave! Chuckling to himself, Dettering submerged.

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If Trieg's smile frightened some, her frown unnerved most. At Calgrave's nape came the prickle of hairs trying to rise, as the Sec'xec said, "You are not now on Earth. But since you had the good sense to say 'request' rather than 'demand,' I'll overlook your otherwise insolent behavior. For the present."

That's good—or is it? As Trieg let the silence stretch, Calgrave tried to figure his next move. Stalling, he said, "We do not ask, Excellency, for full access to all of Fatso's products. There are perhaps a dozen new items, concerning which our government feels a sense of urgency. It is these—"

The woman laughed. "Freeze the blather, Nicolai! I'm

sure you have a list, yes. Eleven products chosen at random, plus Para-dextol-523. Which, no doubt, is listed about halfway down."

Before Calgrave could answer, the neuter cleared its throat. At Trieg's scowl and assenting grunt, it said, "The compound, Madame, you have the name wrong. It is—"

Her mighty fist made the desk resound. "I know I had it wrong; I can't keep that jargon straight. It's close enough." Visibly, she calmed. "But thanks, Isken, for your concern."

In the pause, then, Calgrave found opportunity. "For the sake of discussion, let's do consider that one compound." He made a self-deprecating laugh. "And for me, also, Para-dextol is close enough." From his forward-leaning position he now sat straight. "May we discuss, Excellency, why this new synthesis is prohibited for Earth trade?"

Calgrave wished he could scratch his brains to stir up some action. Because while he hadn't been told that any item on his list was more important than the rest, he'd heard something about this product in another context.

Something important, he thought. But he couldn't remember.

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Dettering not only could, he did. Furthermore, he knew the stuff's real name, which was considerably longer. Stretching his meager store of tact, he waited until Trieg finally answered Calgrave's question. "Earth hasn't been singled out, Nicolai; we're not trading that substance to *anyone*. Because we haven't been able to make it work dependably. And until we do, we're taking no chances on someone else getting a head start on us."

"I don't—" Dettering began.

Surprising him, the neuter answered. "It's Brainmeld, envoy. In theory it puts right and left brains into full communication. And isn't ninety percent of the brain supposedly unused? Well, this—it made a grimace—"this Para-dextol, as we've agreed to call it, may tap much of that capacity."

"Then why—?"

Trieg spoke. "Erratic results. Sometimes brilliant, sometimes temporary, occasionally fatal. We feel—"

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"But with the greater resources of labs on Earth," Calgrave said, "testing could proceed much faster."

He has withstood Uinta Trieg's smile and frown; her sneer was worse. "Which is exactly what we mean to avoid." She waved off his attempt to interrupt. "As such, Earth's government is friendly to us. But within that government are ruthless semiautonomous agencies we do not trust, nor wish to." Calgrave sat quietly while the Sec'xec named—more or less accurately—Sjodin's Group, the Back Office that employed Dettering, plus a few others Calgrave knew of and three he didn't. "If any apparatus of that sort is first to master the theoretical possibilities, there'd be no stopping it. Therefore—"

Calgrave, when he thought about it, had to agree. But

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Dettering, smiling like a salesman offering the best deal any sucker ever heard of, said, "Rumors! Ridiculous, exaggerated canards. Oh, I suppose clandestine operations exist—but rest assured, His Eminence the Chairman keeps them firmly under control." Dettering realized he was borrowing from Calgrave's vocabulary and methods; *whatever works*. He added, "Of course your best assurance is to deal directly through us, and thus bypass the risks you cite."

"Possibly. I think the matter needs more talk." Trieg's huge hands splayed out against her desktop; she raised one to make a gesture, and said, "Talk is dry work. And I haven't been too hospitable, have I? Isken, bring wine for the envoy and his attendant, and for me." She paused, then nodded. "You may have some yourself, if you like."

From a small bar in the room's corner the neuter brought a chilled tankard and glasses. Dettering's attention wavered and

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Calgrave watched the serving done; then Trieg raised a toast: "To cooperation." Calgrave, after a hesitation during which his arm seemed to resist moving, drank and set his glass down. *Odd*, he thought—Trieg's and Isken's were still full. He was going to comment but his voice wouldn't work, and now his vision was trailing off to the southeast, where he noticed Felizia sagging over her own glass. Before he could decide what any of these things meant

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Dettering mumbled, "The bitch fed us a mickey." Even in the dim, limited awareness of down inside, he'd had misgivings about that drink—but too late, now, to bother with blaming Calgrave. This was hardly the kind of ploy a negotiator would be braced for.

As he slumped, unable to resist, Uinta Trieg stood to loom over him. "Two of you," she muttered, "the Purser-provost said. And which one are you, who killed the other?"

"And why?"

IX

Tied to a chair in a small room he hadn't seen before, Calgrave woke, feeling a little doozy but not totally out of it. Forward of him and to his right, Felizia sat in like case—awake, disheveled and a little wild-eyed, but not visibly damaged. No point in trying to talk with her, though, for facing both of them, straddling a chair and resting her heavy elbows on its back, sat Uinta Trieg. And behind her stood the neuter Isken.

The situation, thought Calgrave, was more Dettering's kind of thing. But the other gave no signs of emerging, so Calgrave waited, until eventually Trieg said, "It's a good trick."

Whatever answer she may have wanted, Calgrave didn't have it. He said, "Trick?"

She nodded. "Truth drugs, logical sequences of interrogation—ordinarily one gets reasonable answers. Not with you, though, nor with this two-headed female you brought along. We start to get down to cases, and whingo! You're somebody else and we're back to Tile One. No clues as to which of your identities are real, and I'm beginning to think that none are." Her hands gripped the chair's back; Calgrave heard the wood creak, but Trieg eased her grip short of breakage.

Not hoping much, Calgrave tried anyway. "You've been interrogating us under drugs? Why *you*? Don't you have underlings to do that sort of scutwork?"

"None I can trust with a problem of this magnitude. My sworn vassal Isken has my confidence, but interrogation isn't one of its talents."

The information interested Calgrave; the fact that she gave it so easily did not reassure him. He said, "If you want to know something, why don't you simply ask me?"

Trieg's snort would have done credit to an enraged bison. "Under drugs, Nicolai, you make no sense. Without them, there is only your unsupported word for anything you care to say. No; I will have truth."

He thought fast. "You've heard, of course, about ecstasy conditioning. Which negates the effectiveness of physical torture."

She shook that massive head. "I hadn't, but it doesn't matter; I have a better idea. We'll see how you and your aide respond to Brainmeld. Para-dextol-523."

The idea scared him; still, it beat the hell out of torture. Because there was no such thing as ecstasy conditioning. He said only, "But why?"

Trieg laughed, not the most comforting sound Calgrave had ever heard. "Because maybe the stuff *will* meld your various personalities, real or fabricated, into one. One for each of you, I mean. If it does, possibly I can get some solid answers." She gestured. "Isken. Administer the injections."

The slim neuter came forward; after a moment the needle pierced Calgrave's thigh. What roared through his body, then, felt like fire and ice combined. His vision blurred; when it cleared he saw Felizia's body jerk. As Isken's needle came free of her, she groaned and went limp.

Calgrave tried to speak. "Wha—"

"I do regret this." Through the fog that billowed across his mind as Isken untied him, Calgrave had the thought that Trieg sounded truly solicitous. "For a time, as the drug's effects proceed, your brain will fight itself a great deal. You may die, or become a virtual zombie. Or change into some kind of superhero, in which case I shall probably have to kill you. In self-defense."

She sighed. "Sometimes I think the exercise of power requires more killing than is good for its wielder. But I knew that when I took this job."

had again subsided to tremors, so now he could relax his grip. He—one of them—said to her, “You’re safe, believe it. I’m here.”

From her eyes looked a mix of two women who didn’t know each other. “This is not where I belong. I don’t know where that is, but not here. I—” It went on, and the men had heard it before. If only there were some damn *sedatives* handy! But there weren’t, so cuddling and rocking and soothing murmurs would have to substitute.

When she finally drifted off to uneasy sleep, the men were too bushed to renew their argument. Their own sleep came more easily.

Dettering woke first. Cautiously, hoping not to awaken Calgrave, he eased out of bed and shuffled over to the plain but adequate latrine facility. That’s when he ran into trouble: Calgrave would not allow himself to pee in his sleep. So Dettering gave the facility a kick that jarred his big toe, and muttered, “All right, come alive!”—bracing himself for the impact of Calgrave’s uncoordinated waking. By not much margin, he kept them from falling down.

Calgrave: “What—? Oh, you got us up.” Pause. “Anything new?”

“Now. You want to hold still a minute, here?”

“Right.”

Before deciding, His Eminence the Chairman gave the matter several minutes’ careful thought. Neither Sjodin nor his counterpart in the Back Office would admit to tampering with the other’s agent, but clearly the mission now stank. So scrub it and try again. Quickly he dictated his message to Uinta Trieg, thoughtfully including routing codes to implicate both agencies. Since either, if not curbed, was dangerous. . . .

From her desk Uinta Trieg looked up. “Yes, Isken?”

“A message, Excellency, from Earth.” Isken held the flimsy out to her.

One huge hand waved. “Read it to me. Just the meat of it.”

Isken did so.

For a change, Calgrave and Dettering had some time to work things out. They found out the hard way that with both minds conscious the “two-horse rider” could not exist. Whatever they did would have to be up to both of them, and it wasn’t going to be easy. They needed to establish some ground rules, or—as soon became apparent—fall on their butt a lot.

“Look,” said Dettering. “You have your strong points and I have mine. Either of us can run the hod, but not both at the same time. Okay so far?”

“So far.” Calgrave felt pressured but didn’t like to admit it. The trouble was, Dettering *was* more the action type. “So?”

“So we need cue words, quick signals for which of us handles the body and which lays back and watches.”

Dettering paused. “All right; you work smart and I work

heavy. What say we use ‘heavy’ and ‘smart’ for the keywords, for who takes over?”

“Why not? But, Dettering—we have to be able to trust each other.”

Dettering chuckled. “I know that. What you said before, I thought over. Whether this body started out as you or me, we can’t afford to let that matter. Because it’s all we’ve got.”

Calgrave detected none of the tensions that accompanied lying.

They weren’t done with pain, and neither was the woman; at intervals the drug’s phased actions brought torment. Then came a time when each party was sitting up with only moderate aches, both had eaten, and they could talk together rationally. More or less, anyway—Ingrith seemed to think she was on Earth, but wasn’t making any big case of it.

Between themselves the men had worked out a new communication mode: subvocalizing, like a lip-moving reader. Now Dettering mumbled, *You think we’re close to stabilized?*

Wait and see. Do the best we can. Calgrave stopped, because the door opened to admit Uinta Trieg—and her tame neuter, incongruously brandishing a heavy-hilted stiletto.

Front and center Trieg stalked, to stand with feet spraddled. “Some things,” she said, “here and elsewhere, have changed.” For a moment one mighty hand waved a message-flimsy; unfolding it she did a brief silent scan before speaking. “I skip the blah-blah, the who says what to whom. That which remains, I quote: Envoy status of Nicolai terminated, including diplomatic immunity for acts not sanctioned by this government. In case of doubt, recommend execution. Then follows more blah, including kindest personal regards, His Eminence the Chairman. Of Earth, but doesn’t say that.”

She moved to crumple the paper but the man (Dettering moving before Calgrave sensed intention) lunged to grab it. “*Let me see that!*” Dettering didn’t give a damn about confirming her words; he needed to be up off the cot where he could move.

Calgrave, though, did view the text. Because he wanted to know who the hell had sold him out.

The answer was obvious. Everybody had.

Trieg’s feral grin made no concession to normal human preference. “I’m afraid you’re expendable, Nicolai—and the woman, too.” Peripherally, Calgrave noticed that Felizia/Ingrith looked more intently aware than he’d have expected. The Sec’xec said, “What you get now is your second shot of Para-dextol.” And the neuter Isken, blade in one hand and hypo needle in the other, moved forward.

Heavy! Dettering was already in motion; Calgrave’s first involuntary reaction made the other stumble, but then Calgrave was able to relax his own volition and merely observe. Dettering’s vicious sideways kick made Trieg grab at her kneecap and stagger back, slamming



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one meaty palm against the wall to catch her balance and lever her great weight upright. With no pause the man had the hypo—as Isken cowered, holding both hands to its flattened, bleeding nose. Running out of time, the man pivoted and saw Felizia (for Ingrith couldn't have done it) leap to plunge Isken's knife through the back of Trieg's hand into the wall, solidly to the hilt.

Trying to wrench her hand free, using the other to pull at the knife's handle, the hulking woman groaned and turned pale; blood spurted but the hard-driven blade held firm. Circling to get behind her, where no flailing of the unpinned arm could reach, Detering put the needle to prick the great artery at her throat. "Now then," he said, "we'll see who's expendable."

"No!" Calgrave shouted. Then, not aloud: *Smart, Detering! SMART!* Twitching with impatience Detering paused, then relaxed and let Calgrave have control. Trieg swung her massive body to crush him against the wall; dodging back and away he brandished the needle as if he knew how to use it; she sagged back. "I can inject you with this stuff," he said, "or not. Either way, unless you'd rather be killed immediately, you're going to listen to me." *If you have to bluff, might as well bluff big.* . . .

Her massive shrug came. "And what is so important, useless one, for you to say?" Internally, Calgrave felt the same question, half-articulated, from Detering.

He pointed the needle. "Just hold on a minute. Trieg, we need to make a deal. A deal we can both accept."

The great head shook. "Nicolai, your envoy status is gone. And I spit on the trade treaty your Chairman hoped to extort. He will get his Para-dextol when ice burns with a hard blue flame."

Calgrave couldn't wholly throttle his nervous laugh. "The treaty? Para-dextol? I don't give ratcrap about either one. Those people disowned me; I do the same to them. But perhaps the two of us, just you and I, can reach agreement."

"Just *who* and *I*? Who are you, anyway?"

He thought about it and spoke the best truth he had in stock. "Officially, Ross Nicolai." He cleared his throat. "And I am a reasonable man. I'm sure you won't find my terms too hard to meet."

It wasn't that easy, and not quick at all. But eventually, with Trieg's hand bandaged and Isken's nose stanchied, all of them more or less comfortably seated but with Detering's personal Red Alert in full charge of both knife and hypo needle, Calgrave convinced the Sec'xec that he'd settle for free passage off Fatso and no word sent to Earth of his leaving. She might cheat on that latter part or she might not—but having the option, Calgrave figured, could make her easier to deal with.

"You might," Detering put in at one point, "send our double-dealing Chairman some Para-dextol after all. In a form that breaks down beyond recognition if they try to analyze it."

"Ha!" The Trieg smile had seldom been more frightening. "And the instructions for manufacture—"

"Funny," said Calgrave, "how they always leave out one or two vital steps."

Again taking charge, Detering leaned forward. "Playing around with a limited amount of Brainmeld and poor documentation, our bosses could screw themselves up no end. I'd like that."

With the point perhaps settled or maybe not, finally Trieg nodded. "The ship that brought the betraying message from your superiors. It next goes to Isken's home world, Loki V." With her furry, jutting brows raised, she blinked. "The planet sees a fair amount of ship traffic; will it suit you?"

Calgrave would have nodded but Detering blocked the muscles. *Give her back the knife, and the needle.* And as Calgrave hesitated, *It's a psych move. Come on!* Then Calgrave could and did nod; rising to his feet, he handed the objects over, saying, "Loki V will be fine." As he sat again, Detering told him *Heavy*, so he abdicated.

"One point, Trieg," Detering said. "About not telling Earth anything. That's more important than you might think."

"Oh? You doubt me? Accuse me of having second thoughts?"

"Wouldn't dream of it." The lie, Calgrave thought, sounded convincing. And Trieg couldn't sense, as Calgrave did, the inner tensions that went with producing it. "However—" Detering's pause ensured Trieg's full attention. "There were two of us; remember?" She nodded. "Who says that's *all* there are?"

Down inside and keeping quiet, Calgrave had to admit that Detering wasn't too bad with a bluff, either.

XI

Shuddering, plowing air, the ship *Near Miss* rose from Fatso. By no fault of the ship, the deeper atmosphere made this lift rougher than the man's most recent one, off Earth in *Boomerang*. When altitude reached a grade of vacuum that eased vibration, he unbelted and sat up.

In her own bunk the woman stirred, turned, and looked at him. Detering said, "Hello, lady. We're up and out. Time for talk."

She disengaged her harness and sat upright. "Okay. Now that the drug's leveled off, I know who I am. Both of me. But not who you are. So why don't you tell me?"

"You first." It would be nice, thought Detering, if she had it even halfway right. Calgrave felt the same way, but said nothing.

Her fingers combed back the frizzy hair. "I'm Ingrith Haede, complete in mind and body, with a personality implant of Felizia Abrunno. Felizia—since the drug her memories are mostly open to me and we share consciousness more or less, but I'm in control when I want to be."

Calgrave leaned forward. "Do you detect any change in your own personality, from before the drug?"

"No. Why? Should there be?"

"Para-dextol was supposed to meld the left and right brain hemisphere functions; remember? If it had . . ." He

shook his head. "But I don't feel any difference. In myself, that is."

"Me either," said Dettering. He shrugged. "So the stuff didn't do what they expected. Well, Tieg said it was unpredictable. And just as well, maybe."

Ingrith was looking pensive. "Something wrong?" said Calgrave.

She made a grimace. "Just thinking about something. While I was suppressed, Felizia did some things I wouldn't have." For a moment the grin was pure Felizia; then Ingrith went serious. "But that's all right; I—"

"I'm sorry." And as near as Calgrave could tell, Dettering meant it.

"I said *it's all right!*" As quickly as it came, her sudden resentment cooled. "The on-the-job training was worth it; I have Felizia riding shotgun now, and she's tough. And besides—maybe I *was* a little prudish before, in my own right." Ingrith paused. "From here on, though—as I said before, *I'm* the one in charge of me, and don't anybody forget it!" The answering nod came from both men; then the woman said, "So let's hear who *you* are."

Smart; Dettering let Calgrave speak. Quickly, overriding Dettering's objections against being so open, he told how things had gone with the two of them.

"Then you're both in there as live people? Like me and Felizia, only more so? More equal?" At Calgrave's nod she said, "But which one are you *physically*?"

Dettering pushed no thought so Calgrave spoke. "Short of gene analysis I can't prove it. But I thought back, about the death of the other Nicolai, and logic says I'm right. You're looking at Brian Calgrave, carrying a fully operational implant of Mark Dettering."

Outraged, Dettering broke in. "That's horse-puckey! You're saying you gunned me down?"

Calgrave shook the head. "No; you did. Your training and my reflexes beat your training and *your* reflexes; that's all."

"I don't believe it!"

"You ever play zero-gee handball? Too bad we can't have us a match, here."

Dettering paused. "Logic, you say. Show me some more."

So Calgrave told the series of events he'd theorized: that the Back Office slipped a full Dettering-implant into Calgrave's briefing capsule for the Fatso mission. "Probably a tech-team sneaked in late some night, with faked ID, to check the results."

"Why?" Dettering sounded stubborn. "All of it, I mean."

"Simple: so that the Dettering implant could take over at some crucial moment and kill Uinta Tieg, discrediting Sjodin's Group with the Chairman, to the Back Office's advantage."

"Reasonable," said Dettering. "But then why throw me in as an extra phony Nicolai?"

"Maybe somebody had second thoughts—something in the checkup readings threw a scare, so they decided the real you was a safer bet than the implant. And since *that* switch won't be on any record, either way Sjodin and I would get the blame."

Calgrave felt Dettering sulking, then gradually his mood lightened. "Hey! You mean *we're* faster than I was?"

"Could be. But I doubt we'll use it as much."

Ingrith nodded. "Two different men. It makes sense now." She punched for the intercom's time readout and said, "Ship's salon starts dinner in about an hour." Once more she pushed at her frizzed hair. "All right if I reserve us a table and meet you there? Eighteen hundred?" The man nodded, and she left.

"Let's practice some more," said Dettering. Calgrave agreed; they began. Standing, walking, sitting, pouring a drink and sipping it—learning how to share body control in ordinary ways with no lapses of coordination.

After a time they sat down to a good healthy drink.

"It's getting easier," said Calgrave.

"Yeah." Then, "You haven't talked much lately, so you have to be thinking. What about?"

"Earth," said Calgrave. "His Eminence the Chairman. Sjodin's Group. The Back Office. Who dumped on us, and why? Enough?"

"For now; more later, maybe. What's your thought?"

"While we're still within range of Fatso, to beam some messages back, for forwarding to Earth with the next ship."

All Calgrave had to do was punch his material in to the Comm room, entering the routing codes to take it from there. The beauty of automatic systems, he told Dettering, was that once they used a piece of addressing info, it was deleted from the forwarded message. So that soon an Earthbound ship would carry a group of reports, apparently all written by Uinta Tieg.

"Well, after all," said Calgrave, "she'll cross *us*, won't she?"

Dettering made only one protest. "These messages are supposed to be restricted to Sjodin or to the Back Office, whichever. But the Chairman has access to those codes."

"I know," Calgrave said. "That's what I'm counting on."

Dettering had questions. Why report that both Nicolais had survived, joined forces, and escaped? "New IDs and disguises?" Calgrave nodded. "Abilities superhumanly enhanced by Para-dextol-523," Dettering read off the flimsy. "And then you say we're probably on our way to Earth, vowing to blow hell out of everybody who sold us down the river!" He looked up. "Every time you mention Felizia, I notice, you keep it real vague."

"About her," said Calgrave, "let them wonder." The other questions, he paused before answering.

Dettering frowned. "What *good* will all this stuff do?"

Griming, Calgrave said, "Shake 'em a little; make 'em wet their pants and get trigger-happy. They'll be seeing us in every stray that shows up."

"A bit tough on the strays, wouldn't you say?"

"These things always are. What's the matter, Dettering? You getting soft?"

For dinner they went to the ship's salon. Until Ingrith

waved to them, neither man recognized her—though her face was unusually visible, because her hair was clipped to less than a centimeter. All the Felizia-black was gone; the grown-out roots were entirely Ingrith-blond. Given small, close-set ears on a trimly shaped skull, the result was not unattractive. Unfamiliar, though; sitting across from her, the man gestured. “Nice, but how come?”

“All that bushy black wasn’t *me*. I’m glad you like it this way.”

What Calgrave liked best was the blonde hair long and straight, but he didn’t say so. Dettering said, “Any way at all is fine,” and somehow Calgrave found himself not minding the other man’s obvious interest.

Eating, no one talked much. Over coffee, Dettering said, “Calgrave? You really figure we go to Earth and tear things up by the roots?”

“Could be. Your reputation and my techniques, then maybe the other way around.” A moment of silence, then he said, “I couldn’t do it without you; you know that.”

Dettering cleared his throat. “Same here, I guess.”

“Or maybe—” Calgrave laughed. “Maybe for a while we let them wear themselves out fighting our ghosts, that we sent to them in those messages.” One blink, but Dettering said nothing.

Ingrith stood. “I’m going to the cabin. If you haven’t noticed, we have a bathtub. Not a very big one, though.” “We can check it out,” Calgrave said.

Briefly putting an arm around her waist, Dettering added, “Don’t forget to bring Felizia.”

She smiled. “Of course not.”

Sjodin brooded: the trouble with Calgrave was that he tended to exceed his parameters. Yet if it were *only* Brian Calgrave returning, bent on vengeance as Trieg claimed, Sjodin could have managed; the man was a talker, not a killer. Except for unusual necessity, of course. But if it were true that he now carried a bootleg overlay of Mark Dettering, Calgrave would be deadly beyond imagination.

And given a good disguise surgeon, by now he could look like nearly anybody. Three times in one month, deviations in certain agents’ behavior roused Sjodin’s suspicions. Discreetly he tried to round them up—but they in turn suspected him, and three lethal shootouts resulted.

DNA analyses of the thirteen corpses proved that not one of them was Calgrave—or, for that matter, Dettering.

Less than heartened, Sjodin redoubled his precautions.

At the Back Office, the two surviving members of the

Quadrumvirate exchanged rueful notes. “We’ve let this situation spook us,” said the man, “but no more of that.”

“At least we won’t be ordering each other’s deaths,” the woman replied. “Whatever Dettering’s disguise talents, he’ll never pass for a fifty-kilo female.” Or a Eurasian midget—but the man was sensitive so she didn’t say it.

The man frowned anyway. The woman who’d been on the Para-dextol mission: Felizia Abrunno, wasn’t it? How much had *she* weighed? He made a mental note to look it up.

“We’ll have no more of this!” the Chairman raged.

“No, Your Eminence.” His chief aide bowed. “Of course not, Your Eminence. I’ll see to it right away, Your Eminence.”

“*Are you mocking me?* No, you wouldn’t do that.

You—” Shocked and chilled, the Chairman paused; could this be the dreaded imposter? Calgrave! Dettering!

Better safe than sorry: His Eminence drew and fired.

When the dead man proved to be no imposter, His Eminence’s nominal leader found need to reconsider his options.

Leaving the Chairman’s presence after a seemingly conciliatory conference, Sjodin wondered if just this one more time he could manage to get away alive. He didn’t. The wine he’d been tendered carried a mammoth dosage of the newly arrived Para-dextol; his nervous system did not adjust successfully.

Further evaluation of reports from Fatso may have contributed to other violent inter-agency disturbances. But the most thorough examination of the assassinated Chairman’s files brought no proof that His Eminence had himself ordered the explosive obliteration of the entire Back Office.

Informed opinion, however, attributed the Chairman’s demise to a belated preemptive coup by one of that agency’s operatives.

Settling down with his impromptu staff in a somewhat charred office, the new Chairman moved to make his position secure. “All these off-budget covert operations, stop the payrolls. *Now*.”

“I like this weak gravity,” said Ingrith on Loki V. But if you don’t quit tickling I’m going to get out of this tub, dry off, and leave you all to yourselves.”

After a moment: “Well, that’s better.”

“Whatever you say,” said Calgrave, or maybe Dettering. ♦

The Year of the Guns —Part Two

Rick Shelley

Fella up in Galena, Illinois, once told me I had the temper of a bilious rattlesnake. He was dead before I figured out that he might be right. I was fifteen then. It was about that time I decided to go help Mister Lincoln finish his war with the Rebs. But I hardly had time to get in a lick or two before General Lee surrendered. I couldn't just go back to Galena, though; folks there might not have been ready to forgive and forget. So when I mustered out, I drifted west.

I never dreamed how long the drifting would last.

I was in Lincoln County, New Mexico, when Pat Garrett finally put Billy Bonney down. Then when I heard about the big gunfight the Earp brothers had in Tombstone, I figured it was time to head home and hang up my guns. Eighteen eighty-one just wasn't a good year for folks to earn a living pushing lead.

I still wasn't going back to Galena. I'd have been as out of place there as a dancehall girl at a Sunday School picnic. But some years back I bought me a spread in south Texas, close to the border, outside Eagle Pass. Maybe I should have stayed there when I

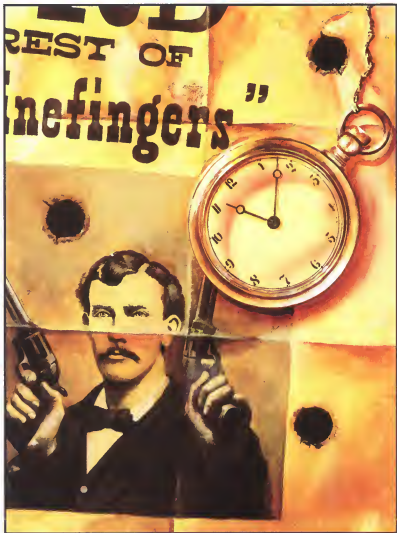


Illustration by Nicholas J. Jirichigg

bought it, found myself a wife and herded cattle, but I could make a sight more money doing what I did, and—most of the time—I guess I felt better than I would have looking at the south end of northbound steers.

But the ranch was waiting for me. Pete Smith was my partner, running it while I was gone. Pedro was the only man I trusted enough to take care of the ranch. Pete, Pedro. He wasn't Mexican, though he spoke the lingo like a native. He was from upstate New York, before the war. We met in the army, rode together for a few months after. When we had enough money, we bought the ranch and he stayed to take care of it. I had more drifting to get out of my system.

Now I was ready to sink some roots. Hellfire, I was only thirty-two but I felt like a hundred. I'd sent so many men to meet their Maker that I knew there'd be one hell of a chorus singing hallelujahs when somebody finally came along just a tad faster than me.

I sold my horse in Fort Stockton, New Mexico, and left in style on the stagecoach, with a new hat on my head and a new carpetbag to hold my gear. The carpetbag and my saddle went up on top of the coach. I had collected a nice poke over the last couple of years. I had a stack of gold coins sewn into my boots and under my belt, enough to fix up the ranch and buy some extra cattle. I kept my revolvers strapped on. I had to protect that poke. Besides, too many folks around Lincoln County might have been tempted to even old scores if they saw me without my irons. I wasn't ready to listen to all those hallelujahs. South Texas gets hot enough in the summer. I was in no hurry for a permanent visit to someplace even hotter.

There was only one other passenger going south from Fort Stockton, a big man I'd seen in the bar the evening before, though I didn't know that then he was going to be on the stagecoach. He was already sitting in the coach when I came out of the hotel in the morning. He nodded when I opened the door and stepped up.

"Howdy," he said. I nodded and said howdy back at him, then settled myself across from him.

"My name's Mike Massey," he said in an easy drawl. He was *big*, not just tall, but wide. "Most folks call me Duke." He stuck out a hand. I reached across and we shook.

"Johnny Butler," I said, quiet-like, I was never ashamed of my name, but I'd learned better than to say it too loud, unless I was feeling mean and looking for a fight—and I wasn't. I knew about Duke Massey. He was nearly as good with a gun as I was. Maybe he'd have told it the other way around.

"How far you goin', Mister Butler—if you don't mind my askin'?" So I saw that he knew my name too. That figured.

"Texas," I said. "Twixt Eagle Pass and Laredo. Got me a ranch down there."

"Good country when there's rain."

"That's the truth," I said. "How 'bout you? I ain't seen you around."

"Just passin' through," Massey said. "Goin' down to Monterey, maybe over to Matamoros."

I nodded. "Man's got to be careful down there. You speak Mexican?" I didn't ask *why* he was going to Mexico. Asking strangers questions like that isn't just poor manners, it can be downright dangerous.

"Man's got to be careful everywhere," Massey chuckled. "Got to be careful, or he's got to be meaner than a mountain lion with a bad toothache."

We both had a laugh. A couple of minutes later, the stagecoach started off.

If the Devil didn't invent stagecoaches, he sure must have cheered for whoever did. That ride was torture. Before we stopped for lunch at a station three hours south of Fort Stockton, I had already picked up a few bruises and bumped my head twice, once hard enough to dangle lights in front of my eyes. Massey got his share too, but he didn't seem to bounce near as much as I did. We each bought a bottle of whisky at the station, and that helped. By the time we stopped for the night, neither one of us could feel much of anything. Couldn't ask for more than that.

It was a long ride from Lincoln County to Eagle Pass. It was nine days from Fort Stockton, New Mexico, to Fort Stockton, Texas, with stops in every little town to drop off mail and sometimes a little freight. Those first nine days, Duke Massey and I were the only passengers. But in the second Fort Stockton, we picked up another rider, a real Nervous Nellie with gray hair sticking out from under his bowler and wire-rimmed spectacles. When he boarded, he stood in the doorway for a moment, looking back and forth between Duke and me.

"How do," he said. He looked around some more—I think he was trying to decide which of us looked less dangerous to sit by. Finally, he sat on my side of the coach. Well, maybe I didn't look less mean, but I sure took up a lot less room than Duke Massey.

"My name's Mitchell Thompson," the tenderfoot said. Duke and I introduced ourselves. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. Sure, Thompson was too small and old to be dangerous, but I didn't want to pick on him. He hadn't done anything to me, and Eagle Pass was still most of a week away.

"How far you goin', pilgrim?" Duke asked as the stage started rolling.

"I'm n-n-n not exactly sure," Thompson said. "Del Rio, Eagle Pass, maybe all the way to Laredo. It d-d-d depends."

"That's a lot of country for not knowin' where you're going," Duke said. "Depends on what, if you don't mind my askin'."

The old guy shrugged and gave us both a nervous smile. "Well, sir, partly it depends on business. I sell life insurance."

I don't know which of us started laughing first, Duke or me. Polite is one thing, but—well, hellfire, a body can only take so much.

"Life insurance?" Duke asked when he stopped guffawing. "That's a peculiar thing to sell around *here*. I hope your company's got deep pockets."

"They d-d-do," Thompson said. He looked flustered, but then he pulled himself up and looked as dignified

as he could. "We only insure people who are good risks."

"Good risks?" I asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"People who aren't likely to get themselves k-killed too soon."

"Well, at least you'll know where to find your 'good risks,'" Duke said. "Out here, the folks who ain't likely to get themselves killed soon can all be found in the same place."

"Boot Hill," I said, before Duke could, and we both started laughing again.

It was three days later before something occurred to me. "You said business was 'partly' what you're doin' down here," I said, shifting to look at Thompson. He had been quiet most of the time, reading or looking out the window. He hadn't even accepted a drink of whisky from either Duke or me; said his stomach wouldn't abide whisky.

"That's right, partly." He closed the book he had kept his nose in most of the time. "And partly, I hope to meet Johnny Ninefingers, the famous gunfighter. I heard he might be heading to this part of Texas. I'd sure like to have a chance to shake his hand."

"Johnny Ninefingers? I ain't never heard of him," I said, looking across to Duke, who shook his head.

"Me neither," he said. "And if he was famous, we would have."

"I've been reading about him for *years*," Thompson said.

"Where'd he get a name like Ninefingers?" I asked. "He an Indian, or a 'breed'?"

"No, sir, he's white. Story is, a man bit one of his pinkies clean off in a fight in Nogales."

"Well, a gunfighter don't hardly need his pinkies," I said. "He got another name?"

"Not that I know of," Thompson said. "Guess he must have, before he lost a finger, but that's how he's known. I've seen stories about him in several newspapers."

"What else is this fella supposed to have done to get so famous?" Duke asked.

"Newspapermen write about him just like the Earps, Billy the Kid, or John Wesley Hardin," Thompson said. "I'd sure like to be able to tell my grandchildren I'd shook his hand. Far as I know, I'm the only man in my family ever had the chance to see his grandchildren."

At first, I didn't think much of that; a lot of folks don't live to see their grandchildren. But Thompson was looking right at me when he said it, and there was something awfully peculiar on his face,

"How's that?" I asked.

"My father was sixty-five when I was born. He died long before I had children of my own," Thompson said. "My grandfather was sixty-two when my father was born. Before that, I don't know."

"I don't know of anybody in my family ever made it to sixty," I said, but that didn't mean nobody had. I hadn't been back to Galena in seventeen years. I didn't have any idea who was still alive, who was dead.

"Why not go east and meet the President or someone like that? Have something really special to tell your grandkids about," Duke said.

"Oh, but Johnny Ninefingers *is* special. I think we're related, sort of distantly."

Thompson was so eager to talk about this Johnny Ninefingers then that we'd have had to stuff a cork in his mouth to shut him up. I seriously considered it, starting not five minutes later.

It was spooky as hell. Now, Thompson had one hell of a lot wrong—some of the things he talked about never happened, and none of them happened *exactly* the way he said—but he seemed to be talking about me. He even had me counting fingers to make sure I still had all ten.

"An' you're lookin' to meet this Ninefingers?" Duke asked when the old man finally ran dry. "Fella like that, I'd get a mite nervous just bein' in the same town." He winked at me, then laughed.

Thompson didn't answer. He just went to his book. He'd spent so much time reading it already I figured he must have it memorized, but that didn't stop him from reading it some more. Duke went back to his bottle. I went back to mine.

But I couldn't get the things Thompson said out of my head.

Eagle Pass wasn't much of a town, smaller than most and as dirty as any. For the most part, everything in town was adobe. The buildings were squeezed close together. It wouldn't take a whole lot of work to block off the spaces between the buildings and throw barricades across the streets. That part of Texas wasn't so civilized yet. It wasn't just that there were a lot of folks like Duke and me around. There was still Indian trouble from time to time, and Indians weren't the only troubles. One time, a gang of *banditos* raided the town, coming across the Rio Grande to steal all the gold, food, and livestock they could.

The sheriff's office and the stage company were on the right when we stopped. The hotel and the only real saloon in town were across the street. Maybe a dozen folks came out to meet the stage. That didn't mean they were looking for anything special. There just wasn't much else to do in Eagle Pass. The shotgun handed down my carpetbag and saddle. The driver handed the mail over to the company agent, then yelled, "Lunch, one hour."

"I think I'll stop over here for a while," Mitchell said, timidly, as if he were afraid someone would tell him he couldn't. "When does the next coach come through for Laredo?"

"Next week, with luck," the agent said. "You sure you want to stop here?"

"Yes," Mitchell said. "I might be able to sell some insurance." The shotgun tossed down Mitchell's two small bags.

"I think I'll stick around a time myself," Duke said, stretching mightily. "My bones have had all the jarrin' they can take." He got *bis* bags handed to him as politely as I had. The shotgun was no fool.

"Up to you folks," the driver said.

The sheriff was looking us over closely by that time. I

hadn't been in town for years, and I didn't know the man behind the badge. He apparently didn't know me either, but he looked close at both Duke and me, like he *wanted* to know about us.

"You fellas lookin' for anything special here?" the lawman said.

"I'm Johnny Butler," I said. "Pete Smith's partner." The lawman nodded at me, then looked to Duke.

"Friend of mine," I said.

"Duke Massey," he said. "Just passin' through. I expect I'll be headin' on to Laredo on the next stage."

"It's a quiet town," the lawman said, meaning, *Let's keep it like that*. He looked at me again. "I was never sure Pedro really had a partner. You've been away a long time."

"I'm here to sell insurance," Mitchell Thompson said. He seemed put out that he was being ignored. Anyway, it saved me from having to answer the sheriff. "You *do* have a hotel here, don't you?"

"Right there, Mister Thompson." I pointed. "It's more a boardin' house than a hotel, but the Andersens call it a hotel." I looked at the sheriff. "The Andersens do still run it, don't they?" I asked.

"Missus Andersen," he said. "Hank died of pneumonia last winter."

"Too bad," I said. "He was a good man." I stared at the sheriff for a moment. "I've been away a few years, but I don't recall seeing you around here, sheriff."

"Been here since seventy-seven. Name's Armour, Bob Armour."

"You ever need help, I'll be glad to lend a hand," I told him. "I figure to stay put, out at the ranch."

Armour nodded. "You goin' straight out there?"

"Now, I think I'll stay in town for a day or two, get some of the dust off and such. Pedro come in much?"

"Might be in before long. Should be back from drivin' his cattle north 'most any day."

"You goin' to show me this hotel, Johnny?" Duke asked. "Gettin' awful dusty standin' out here jawin'."

"Yeah. I'll introduce you to Missus Andersen. You comin', Mister Thompson?"

Missus Andersen remembered me, but didn't hold it against me. I'd always minded my step around Eagle Pass. Any gun work I did was always a long way off. I got a room and gave her a week's rent to keep her happy. After I looked over my room, I went down the street to the barbershop for a shave and a bath. Duke came in just as I was about to leave. From the smell of gun oil, I knew he'd taken time to clean his revolver before coming down to get himself clean. Anyplace but Eagle Pass, I'd have done the same.

"Meet you in the saloon," I told Duke while I was dressing. "Last time I was here, they had good food."

"What about the whisky?" Duke asked.

I shrugged. "Probably won't kill you."

"That's good enough for me."

"For that, you gotta try their tequila," I said. I was laughing as I left. So was Duke. I guess he knew about tequila.

I took a slow walk down the street and looked in at the general store just to nod and say hello. Tobias Whitmore was still there, looking about two hundred years old.

"There's a drummer in here, just a few minutes ago," Tobias said, his voice a squeak that could stand your hair on end. "*Insurance* drummer, askin' 'bout some gunman named Johnny Ninefingers. You ever heard of him?"

"Never," I said. "The drummer was on the stage talkin' 'bout this Ninefingers. I think somebody's been tellin' him tall tales."

"Mebbe," Tobias agreed, "but he said he read about him in the newspapers."

"Well, the man's loco enough to sell *life* insurance here. What can you expect?"

Tobias laughed so hard that tobacco juice leaked down his chin. I laughed, waved, and went down to the saloon.

Reason Richards's saloon wasn't fancy, just another dark little adobe building. The bar was a long plank strung over several barrels. There were four tables, maybe a dozen chairs. At one end of the bar Reason kept one keg of whisky and two kegs of beer. If you wanted good whisky, you paid extra for bottled. If you wanted fire, you bought tequila. That came across the border in earthenware jugs. The only thing special about the saloon was the food. Reason had a Mexican cook who could do wonderful things in a kitchen. Soon as I walked in the door, I yelled at Reason to have her fix me up whatever was good, even before I ordered my beer.

"Johnny Butler, as I live and breathe," Reason said. He set a beer in front of me. "First one's on me." I nodded and thanked him. "You gonna be around long?"

"I'm home for good. Figure it's time I settled down."

"Out at the ranch?"

"Yup. You see Pedro in here much?"

"Likes to come in of a Saturday night, now and then," Reason said.

Duke came in as Estrellita was bringing my food.

"That smells mighty good, ma'am," Duke said, easing up to the bar next to me. "Can I get the same?"

Reason glanced at me before he nodded to Duke.

"Don't get nervous, Reason," I laughed. "This is Duke Massey. Met him on the stage comin' down."

"I'd like some whisky now, then beer with my food," Duke said. He pulled out a five dollar gold piece and spun it on the bar. "I got a powerful thirst today. Just let me know when I need to dig out more money."

Duke and I spent the afternoon and a good part of the evening in the saloon. We sat at a table in the back corner so each of us had a wall behind us, where we could watch the whole place. Habits like that die hard. I had no itch to end up the way Hickock did. Man liked to play poker too much for his own good.

Somehow, I managed to get back to the hotel and into bed. It had been a lot of years since I'd been anywhere I felt safe enough to pour that much liquor down my throat in one day. But I did feel safe. I was almost

home. There wasn't anybody around with a grudge against me, that I knew of. The only man who might be good enough with a gun to give me worries was Duke, and he was as drunk as I was.

I slept like I was dead. It was nigh onto noon before I woke the next morning.

My head felt like somebody had set off a couple of sticks of dynamite behind my eyes. My tongue felt like a saddle blanket. Past all that, I felt just plain awful. Maybe several minutes passed before I figured out that not all of that banging was inside my head.

I got up and staggered over to the window to see what all the ruckus was about.

There was a crowd in the street. Well, for Eagle Pass, it was a crowd, maybe thirty people standing there listening, five men playing music, and several more standing up on the sidewalk in front of the sheriff's office.

The banging was some fella putting too much effort into his cymbals. The tuba and trumpets and drums didn't help any. Men have been shot for less. But there were too many people out there for me, even if I'd been as ornery as Hardin, and hung over as I was, I probably couldn't have hit the ground if I'd fallen out the window.

I weaved over to the nightstand and poured the pitcher of water over my head into the washbowl, then dunked my face in the bowl and held it there as long as I could. The banging kept going outside. The banging in my head eased, just a mite.

Before I got dressed, the music stopped. I heard talking then, too low to hear the words, but loud enough to be annoying. My hands were shaking when I strapped on my guns, so I found a bottle with a little whisky left, and took that down quick—hair of the dog. I figured that would hold me until I could get some coffee.

After a trip round back to the outhouse, I went out front to see what the commotion was. Missus Andersen was on the porch, watching and listening, so I asked her what the to-do was about.

"That tall gent in the pearl gray suit, that's Congressman Jimmy Settles," she said. "He's gonna run for the United States Senate and he wants votes."

The Congressman had a real slow way of talking, as if he had to hunt for each word. By the time he'd get to the end of an idea, you'd forget where the hell he started.

"He'd-a had Mister Andersen's vote for sure, rest his soul," Missus Andersen said.

With the way my head ached, it took me a moment to figure out whose soul she was resting. "You got a pot of coffee on, Missus Andersen?" I asked.

"Always coffee on the stove. Looks like you need it bad," she said.

"That's a fact," I said.

"You remember where it's at?" she asked, helpful, not sassy.

"I reckon so."

An hour later I felt good enough to go down to the saloon for a meal, a big mess of scrambled eggs with onions and chili peppers chopped up in it. The ruckus out in the street was long over by then. The women had

gone off to do woman things. The men had followed Congressman Settles into the saloon. While I ate and then poured beer down my throat to cool off those onions and peppers, the Congressman jawed fit to beat all, a mug of beer in his hand. He could take a long drink just about any time, even in the middle of a sentence, and folks would hardly notice. He talked that slow.

I'd finished eating and was on my second beer when Duke came in. He almost turned around and left when he saw the Congressman, but there wasn't anywhere else in town to get a drink, and I guess that was more important. Duke looked as bad as I had felt when I woke up. He got his beer and came down to my end of the bar.

"Feels like someone tore my head off, then nailed it back on crooked," he said, very soft, as if his own talking hurt.

"Know what you mean," I said.

"Bad enough without all that jabberin'."

That didn't even need an answer.

Duke and I had different ways to deal with hangovers. I was already coming out of mine, and sipping slow at that beer to make sure I didn't get another. Duke set right out to drown his hangover.

Then Mitchell Thompson came in, about the time the Congressman left, and the afternoon got really wicked.

"I've t-talked to almost everyb-body in town," he said. Thompson was actually worked up enough to take a beer, no matter what he'd said about his stomach before. "Nobody ever h-heard of Johnny Ninefingers. It can't be. It just can't!"

"Listen, Mister," Duke said through his teeth. "This ain't a good time for so much racket. You're as bad as those damn cymbals."

Thompson got a little green around the edges and backed up a step. "Sorry," he said, bringing his voice down to a whisper. "I didn't mean to cause no trouble, but this can't be right."

"Maybe all them writers you was tellin' us about was weavin' fairy tales about this Ninefingers," I said.

Thompson shook his head. "No, he's real. I've seen his gr—" He shut up then, biting off that last word before it really came out. I thought he was going to say "grave," but he sure wouldn't be looking to meet this Ninefingers if he was dead.

A little later, the sheriff came in and yelled for Thompson.

"What is it, sheriff?" Thompson asked.

"You got business waitin' over to my office."

"Business?" Thompson looked real puzzled.

"Missus Morgan just come from Doc Williams's office. Her husband's dead. Says you sold him insurance yesterday."

Thompson sputtered a lot before he got any real words out. "That can't be. It just can't." Again. "Daniel Morgan should live another twenty years."

"Don't know about that 'should,' Mister," Sheriff Armour said. "But I do know he's dead, and you'd best be respectful when you go over to my office and pay that insurance money."

"It's just not right!" Thompson shouted. "This is all wrong. This isn't the way it happened!"

Now, I'm as sure as I can be that he said that last line. It was crazy, but that's what he said. He turned and moved right up close to me. He grabbed at my shirt and pulled me toward him. I was too shocked to be properly upset. Most times, somebody grabbed me like that, I'd have slapped him silly.

"It can't be," he said, looking up to me, begging me to tell him it wasn't. It just didn't make sense.

"Get a grip on yourself," I said, taking his wrists and prying him loose of my shirt. "Pay up like a man."

"You don't understand. That man can't be dead. He didn't die until nineteen oh-two. And you, you're Johnny Ninefingers. I know it. You must be him."

That was all I could take. I shoved him away from me with both hands. He stumbled backward, tears on his face.

"You're crazy," I said. "I never heard of Johnny Ninefingers." The mistake I made was that I started to turn back to the bar. Thompson was terribly slow pulling the little revolver out from under his coat, but I wasn't expecting anything like that, and I was moving the wrong way. I got my left hand out for balance while I turned and reached for my own gun. Thompson got off the first shot, and even though he wasn't six feet from me, he damn near missed.

I felt a burning in my left hand, and that arm jerked back and up. But my right hand got one of my Colts out and I put my first shot through the middle of Thompson's chest. Sheriff Armour hadn't even had time to react. I was thumping back the hammer for a second shot before the sheriff spoke up.

"That won't be necessary," he said, sharply. I gave Thompson another look. He was on his back, but his eyes were open, still alive—if not for long. There was a look of disbelief on his face. I holstered my gun.

"Self-defense, sheriff," I said, finally looking at him. He hadn't drawn his gun.

"Jesus, Johnny," Duke said. "Look at your hand."

I looked. The little finger of my left hand was gone, and there was blood pouring out of where it used to connect to my hand. Looking at it made it hurt worse.

"Ninefingers," Thompson said, with more force than I'd have thought he had left. "Grandpa, I didn't mean it." But he was dead before I could say anything. I looked down at him. The sick feeling in my stomach had nothing to do with my hand or my hangover.

While I wrapped a kerchief around my hand and tried to stop the bleeding, Duke knelt by Thompson's side.

"Look at this gun," he said. "It's one of those new double-action revolvers. Thirty-two caliber."

"Like Billy Bonney carried," I said.

Duke set the gun down, then pulled that book from Thompson's pocket. "I been wonderin' about this," he said, standing and opening the book.

"Best you get to Doc Williams's place," the sheriff

said, coming over to me. "He can sew that up and stop the bleedin'."

I nodded, looking down at the hand, but then Duke whistled.

"You want to see this," he said. He handed me the book, open to the middle. There wasn't much light in the saloon, but I tilted the book to get the best there was and started reading.

VIII. Johnny Ninefingers

Although not the most famous gunman of the Old West, Johnny Ninefingers is one of the most interesting. Among other things, his "career" extended from 1864 to 1907, and even though he may have killed thirty men, he ended his career as a lawman, then retired peacefully and became one of the leading citizens of south Texas in the early years of the twentieth century.

I looked at the title page in front. It said "*The Year of the Guns—Part One*, by Mitchell Thompson." The date at the bottom of the page was 2037.

Twenty thirty-seven? I walked over to the door where the light was better. Duke and the sheriff trailed after me. For the moment, nobody bothered with Thompson. He was dead. He would keep for a while. I read through the book's short preface. At the end of that, there was a section that I committed to memory, almost right on the spot.

This volume presents the Old West and the gunmen who were active in 1881, the peak—and yet the beginning of the end—of the Old West of literature and video, as is currently known to historians. Before you read this, I will most likely be back in 1881 myself, time-traveling to obtain reliable eyewitness accounts of the most famous events of that year: the Gunfight at the OK Corral in Tombstone, the Lincoln County Range War, and the death of Billy the Kid. I also hope to make a side trip to south Texas to meet my grandfather, the gunman known to history (and his family) as Johnny Ninefingers.

I stayed in town until Thompson was buried, then headed out to the ranch. It was a terrible winter. I had nightmares almost every night. I still have them, now and again. I've read that book so many times, I almost know it by heart. It's hard to believe, but there were things that Thompson wrote about, things that happened after eighteen eighty-one, and so far, most of them have happened. He had some details wrong, the way he had some of the stories about me wrong, but mostly, he had things right.

It's scary as hell.

But on the other hand, it's nice to know that I'm going to live another twenty-odd years or more. Or else I won't be around for my son to be born, and if I miss that, how could my grandson come back for me to kill him? ♦

Epitaph for Earth Magic

Robert Hodge

Woolsey crouched on the porch, expecting at any moment to see that Ol' Goblin come charging out of the shadows, him and his boogeymen, but nothing stirred in the yard. Nevertheless, the shadows were beginning to stretch and fade, and pretty soon that Ol' Goblin—Mr. Chinkypin was his name—soon he would be bold enough to come right up to the house.

Anxiously, Woolsey scanned the yard, peering at the twisted mulberry tree and staring into the darkness beneath the flurries of maple-oak leaves, but nothing stirred. And not even a hint of movement from the tool shed, neither.

So Woolsey jumped down into the yard, quickly stomping three times, kicking up the dust, gathering it till he was covered, till he could feel the



Illustration by Kevin Mathis

earth magic all around, and then he hopped forward, to the stump.

His stick lay there, the woodsman's stick, wrapped in earth magic. He scooped it up, and it wiggled in his hand, like always—it wiggled, and glowed, and turned into sharp steel.

Stepping forward, he waved the sword at the shadows. "Now where are you, Mr. Chinkypin?" But there was no sign of that Ol' Goblin, and Woolsey knew he'd have to go to that other place to chase him down.

He left the house behind, and Mama banging around in the kitchen, and Father talking with Uncle Joe about green beans and the "war in You're Up" that everybody always talked about—he let it fade away, and the yard began to glow that glow, so he knew he was close.

Checking the yard for Mr. Chinkypin one last time, he closed his eyes and spun around three times.

Around, around, around, and he opened his eyes.

Little lights floated in the air, erratic miniature comets, winking on and off—there were always more lightning bugs in this place. And more boogeymen too.

Woolsey crouched down near the dust, near the earth magic, where he could grab a big handful if he needed. He crouched down and he listened.

Just down the low hillside, he could hear that tinkle of the creek where the faeries would be playing, but there was another noise, nearer, a rustling.

Creeping almost on all fours, he stole forward to a grassy knoll and popped his head over its top.

Not a dozen feet away, a lone boogeyman was tying a snare to a brambly bush. Grunts and grumbles joined the rustling as the boogeyman strove to keep his tripwire taut while fastening it.

Crawling forward, Woolsey was an arm's length away from the boogeyman's rope, and the boogey was leaning into the bush, wrapping the cord around a stout branch and muttering curses, when Woolsey hacked at the line with his sword, snapping it and sending the boogeyman head over heels into the thicket.

Laughing, Woolsey leapt forward and hacked at the bush and the boogeyman trapped inside.

"No! No! No!" screamed the boogeyman.

Grimacing, Woolsey hacked even harder, ripping leaves and whole branches off the bush.

"Stop!" screamed the boogeyman.

Woolsey leapt back, scooped up a handful of the dust, and shook it three times.

"Stop! What are you doing?" Mrs. Bell waddled toward them, and the boogey dropped out of the bush and melted into the shadows before Woolsey could stop him. "How could you destroy my bush?" cried Mrs. Bell.

Woolsey brandished his sword and smiled proudly. "It was easy!"

A strange look crossed Mrs. Bell's face, and then she burst out laughing and wiping tears from her eyes. She tried to say something, but laughed even harder, finally sputtering, "Go kill your own bush, Edwin."

Woolsey winced—his name *was* Edwin, but it was such a stupid name that he refused to respond to it, and instead went by his middle name.

He wanted to point this out to Mrs. Bell, but she was already waddling away, still laughing and shaking her head from side to side.

Briefly, Woolsey wondered if she might in fact be Mr. Chinkypin in one of his many disguises, but no—she was just Mrs. Bell, though he did have to wonder how she managed to cross over to this place.

Where could she have learned earth magic? he wondered. Certainly not from any of the faeries he knew.

It was curious, but he finally decided that she must just be an old witch, and left it at that. (Though she probably cooked children and ate them, and he should have whacked her with the sword when he had the chance!)

But then, it did bring up the question of Mr. Chinkypin, which was more important to think about. *What will be look like this time?* he wondered. A big jelly blob, or all twisty and snakey, or maybe just a hunchbacked monster with red eyes and pointy claws.

Shivering, Woolsey crept down to the creek, picking his way carefully to avoid pitfalls and boogey snares, and flinching at every sound.

The creek was bubbly and clear, and the water looked cold. He could see little fish darting here and there, and clumps of watercress like tiny underwater forests—he wondered if there was another place down there, a place he might visit sometime, it looked so pretty.

Woolsey didn't see any faeries, which was odd, so he danced about for a while, throwing handfuls of dust into the air, and then he skipped rocks till the faeries came.

Ona Lea and Fona Lea, his faerie friends, hopped up out of the creek and onto the bank, shaking water from their scaled bodies and fanning their leathery wings.

"Hi, Ona Lea! Hi, Fona Lea!"

The faeries, who were each half as tall again as Woolsey, bowed down, nuzzling him with their long snouts and whispering hello.

"What's wrong?" asked Woolsey. "How's come you're whispering?"

Ona Lea plopped down onto her belly and sighed. "There is something wrong in this place, something very bad."

Woolsey frowned. "Something bad?"

Fona Lea nodded, hissing. "Very bad. Even Mr. Chinkypin is a-scaared of this."

"Tell me what it is, an' I'll kill it!" cried Woolsey, snatching up his blade and waving it overhead.

"Nobody knows what it is," Ona Lea's voice shook. "But if it doesn't go away, we'll all have to."

Woolsey sat on a rock and thought about that for a while, but it was getting dark, and he would have to go soon. Yet he couldn't bear to see the faeries so unhappy.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll find the thing, and it will be nothin'. I'll take care of it."

Ona Lea and Fona Lea padded toward the water, and Woolsey called after them, "Is there another place down there in the creek? A place like this?"

"Not like this," answered Fona Lea. "But there is another place."

Woolsey smiled, "A water magic place, right?"

The faeries smiled and dove into the creek, vanishing.

And Woolsey turned to go, but stopped short, a glitter upon the ground catching his eye. He stooped, lifting a shiny gold chain, coiled like a tiny snake, with a thin charm dangling from its middle.

He tucked it in a pocket and hurried home, tossing the sword into the stump and shaking the earth dust from his clothes before stepping into the house.

Next day was warm and humid, even the flies seeming sluggish, buzzing lazily, but Woolsey was undaunted.

Sword in hand and armored in earth magic, he crossed into that other place, determined to find whatever monster the faeries had hinted at.

He'd pretty much decided it must be a monster, maybe a giant. If it was bad enough to scare Mr. Chinkypin, it had to be something awful. Wiping a sleeve across his nose, he thought of all the times he'd killed Mr. Chinkypin just to find him alive again a day or two later in a different disguise.

And *this* monster was even stronger.

Woolsey pushed through underbrush, hacking at twigs (but keeping clear of poison ivy and oak), and any boogeymen he stumbled upon fled without a fight.

Breaking out of the woods, he found himself knee-deep in tangles of grass on the bank of the creek. Faeries splashed in the glittering water, but Woolsey didn't call to them—instead, he clambered onto a boulder and sat upon it, and he thought about the monster.

Maybe a real bad witch? Or a huge, gigantic ant? he thought. Uncle Joe had once told him that if an ant was as big as a man, it could carry a wagon. Maybe a horse too.

Woolsey scratched at his neck, lost in thought, and the faeries watched him, and so did the boogeymen, peeping out of bushes or from behind tree trunks. And Woolsey stayed that way for a while, till he noticed someone approaching him from upstream.

A girl walked slowly along the bank, eyes downcast, but when she saw Woolsey, she hurried toward him.

"Hullo, Woolsey."

Woolsey cleared his throat, "Hullo, Morgan." Glancing about, he could see the faeries and boogeymen hiding, so he knew he was still in that other place, but how did she get there?

"What're you doing with *that*?" she asked, pointing at his sword. "Did you break your papa's axe?"

Woolsey gasped, stared at the woodsman's stick, the axe handle—but it was a *sword*!

She didn't wait for an answer, but frowned. "I lost my lucky charm here yesterday. You haven't seen it, have you?" She glanced about, and the faeries retreated further into the shadows.

But Woolsey slid down off the boulder and dug around in his pocket, finally withdrawing the chain he'd found the day before and all but forgotten.

"Is this it?"

"Yes! You found it!"

Woolsey handed it to her and looked away, and twinkling boogey eyes reminded him—"What are you doing here?"

She giggled. "Looking for my lucky charm, Woolsey."

"Er . . . oh." He stammered, looking sidelong at nothing in particular. His head felt a little light.

"Your clothes sure are soiled."

Woolsey didn't want to mention the earth magic, so he half-turned, gesturing back at the woods. "I was up in there."

She smiled, and Woolsey traced a line in the dust with one shoe.

"Well, thank you," she finally said.

Woolsey smirked, shrugged, and before he could do anything, she leaned forward and kissed him. A peck on the cheek. A little, insignificant nothing of a kiss.

She turned and walked away, and Woolsey didn't even think of snatching up his sword and attacking, didn't think of scooping a handful of earth magic and blasting her. Woolsey suddenly realized that she was *it*.

And he just watched her walk away.

"See you later, Woolsey!" Morgan waved goodbye from far across the creek, and she smiled, pointing at the lucky charm dangling about her neck.

Woolsey smiled and waved back, and he didn't remember walking home, or crossing back out of that other place, or *anything* except that kiss.

He just found himself on his porch, thinking about how much he'd miss that earth magic place when it went away, and wondering how much longer it'd be there. And he took a long, long time dusting the earth magic off his clothes. ♦

Necessity Is the Mother of Invention . . .

. . . Bastard Progeny Notwithstanding



Larry Tritten

Impoverished and despondent, Saran arrived in the gray port city of Expectoration Beach in a drenching rainfall and found shelter beneath the slanting roof of the open-air porch of a hammock shop where he stood glumly and watched the dismal rain cascade in a thin sheet onto the cobbled street. After a while an old man with a nonchalant expression walked out onto the porch beside him and said, "Rain."

Saran turned a deadpan look on him.

"You like it?" the old man asked.

Saran, who was soaked and chilled, his hair plastered upon his pate, gazed at him sullenly. "I rarely enjoy a deluge that catches me in the open without a rain parasol on a day when brigands have stolen my pouch," he said. It was not true that his funds had been purloined, but his remark was calculated to mobilize the old man's sense of charity if such existed. The truth was that he had made a few maxims playing a shell game recently at the fair at Corner Bluffs, but he had spent nearly all of that on food and drink at Sutler Posts during the thirty-mile hike through the Devil's Perineum, the long

Illustration by David Detrick

arid gorge that separated Corner Bluffs from Expectoration Beach.

The old man inclined his head forward and peered at Saran more intently, squinting, and then drew back. "Oh, heh, I see," he exclaimed. "You are something of a sodden mess. Can't see past the range of an old dog's sneeze without my spectacles? Down on your luck, eh?" He shrugged and shook his head. "Well, let it never be said that old Pamplemeir didn't have a soft spot in his head for an honest victim. If you come inside I'll brew some noodle and nettle soup, heat a little wine, and if you'd like to take comfort in a nice soft hammock for a bit, that will be warranted, too."

"Indeed I would," Saran said graciously, "and I'll be in your debt for a kindness I hope to one day recompense."

"Fuddle!" said the old man, and motioned Saran in after him. Inside the shop a variety of colorful hammocks were strung to and fro, creating a complicated maze of fabrics and netting. The old man-guided Saran through a narrow aisle and into a small back room furnished with a cluttered *escritoire* and two plush leather chairs. "Settle your fundament here; I'll put on the soup and heat the wine," he said, and went into an adjoining kitchen. Saran settled into a chair, looking inquisitively at the paperwork on the *escritoire*, which seemed to consist of invoices and the like. Then the old man returned and sat in the other chair.

"Brigands, eh?" he asked.

"They took all of my money and abused my person," Saran said dejectedly. "Leaving me in somewhat ticklish circumstances."

"Well, but you're young and you'll bounce back like a ball off a wall. I remember once when I myself, at about your age, found myself in a foreign city without a dull copper to my pouch, but I overcame the situation. In fact, in retrospect, it seems a bit romantic and exciting . . . the challenge of it. A man transcends such adversity—or he's a slinking whelp with no pepper in his pants. Who are you, then, and what are your plans?"

"I am a gypsy by philosophical inclination," Saran said, "and I came here because I heard there might be work as a sailor, or perhaps on the docks."

The old man made a wooden face. "Well, you were given the wrong advice there. The truth is, Expectoration Beach is a fatally moribund port, despite the citizenry's best efforts to revive it. The ocean is now more than half a mile from the beach."

Saran inquired about the name of the city.

"A curse was put upon the city by a terribly powerful wizard who lost a shipment of crystal animals when a clumsy stevedore dropped a crate. For six years since, the ocean has been slowly receding from the shore in spite of the nightly ritual of spitting into the waters by the entire population in an effort to replenish it. This is now essentially a ghost port. Years ago it was a thriving port named Celestial Beach. The new name is an ironic commentary on the situation."

"The spitting would seem like an obviously hopeless gesture," Saran remarked.

"Ah, but hope is illimitable among the folk," said the

old man, "especially where their livelihoods are concerned. In actuality, the city is largely deserted. Abandoned houses lie open everywhere, destitution is a specter haunting all but the wealthy. Your situation is not considerably more harsh than that of many hereabouts. Fortunately, a welfare mentality has been generated by the dilemma, so there is always a bit of bread and soup at one of the charity halls for the needy. I've seen much worse situations in foreign lands where selfish hoarding obtained during stricken times."

Saran was not encouraged, but he was grateful for the food and wine that the old man brought him, even though the soup had a slightly septic taste and its nettles were as treacherous as fish bones and the wine was so acerb that it transfigured his tongue; but both were warm and filling, and the old man's intentions were laudable.

When Saran had finished his untasty repast, he said, "That warmed me—now I would sincerely enjoy the nap you suggested, which perhaps will exacerbate my spirits before I set out."

The old man chuckled. "Take the hammock of your choice and sleep until the ocean recedes another half-mile if you wish. You must have deduced that my business is defunct and that I tend shop in the manner of someone keeping a vigil at the end of time."

As he was selecting a hammock, there was a sound from the porch, and Saran looked up to see a corpulent man in a green felt suit with a pink cape decorated sparingly with black sequins as he entered the shop: the ensemble made Saran think of a melon and its seeds. The man had a neatly trimmed white moustache that was in contrast with his white hair, which looked as if it had been tossed like a salad, and his gaze had a hint of imperial denotation in it. He was shaking the rain from a dripping black parasol.

"Pamplemeir, ho!" he called.

The old man came forward, straining to see him better. "Yeh, Garblack, is that you?"

"It's me," the large man said. "I'm in the market for a new hammock. And quickly! The netting in the old one finally gave way to the cumulative bulk of the agglomeration of farm animals and crops that comprise my girth—and that in mid-cerebration as I languished like a back-lolling swimmer on the brink of a revelatory thought. Next thing I knew, my rump was on the floor and my legs tangled in netting. I must have a new hammock at once, so I can retrieve the spoor of my thoughts. I think I was onto something!"

Watching the stranger, Saran reflected that his appearance was in no wise consonant with the general privation Pamplemeir had attributed to the area. Suddenly the man noticed him and engaged his gaze. "Oh, hello," he said, and extended his hand. "My name is Garblack—you know your own!" He chuckled at his joke as Saran shook his hand.

"Well, pick yourself a hammock, Garblack," Pamplemeir said. "You'll need an expensive one to accommodate that gut, but of course *you* can afford it!"

"I like to cogitate while suspended in mid-air," Garblack said to Saran. "I find that the body in buoyant sus-

pension facilitates unanchored thought, so to speak, which of course is the freest and most illuminating kind and naturally necessary to my profession, which is inventing."

"Garblack here is probably the last nabob in these parts," Pamplmeir put in. "A year or so ago he sold an invention in Ormsby for which he carried home his weight in reticulated gliders!"

"Ha, ha, and I've lost some weight since then," Garblack exclaimed with effusive good cheer. "Well, in any case, I damn well earned it, Pamplmeir. I don't sit around blinking at lint like most of our folk. I spend my time harvesting the yield of my reflections—but for the betterment of all."

"True, true," Pamplmeir agreed.

"What was the profitable invention, if I might inquire?" Saran asked Garblack.

Garblack nodded suavely. "It was a revolutionary method of pesticide, namely a small open box called the Insect's Inn carpeted with a vermicidal treacle irresistible to the errant roach, fly, or whatnot who are lured in by the effluvia of sweetness and who then remain permanently—heh, heh . . . get it?"

"Ingenious," said Saran.

"Indeed," averred Garblack. "Consider. One is spared the insecticidal pursuit of individual bugs as well as the uncouth spectacle of their death throes and subsequent corpses. The Inns sell like sweet cakes at a fair. Perhaps you could use a couple yourself?"

Saran sighed. "I think not. I am just newly arrived here and have lost my purse to brigands, a sure dilemma that puts me in a precarious situation if I cannot find work posthaste."

Garblack studied Saran, and after a few moments said, "Overlooking your soaked garb, you appear to be able, a man of curiosity and intelligence."

"I will make my way," Saran said, somewhat wearily. "As I always have."

"Hmmm. . . . Garblack worried his chin between thumb and forefinger, studying Saran closely. "Are you by academic background or personal habit predisposed to a dialectical, inquiring attitude toward things?" he asked.

"Indeed, toward *all* things," Saran replied. "I am, in fact, the author of two tomes, *Pre-Cognitive Intimations of Post-Perceptive Inklings* and *A Psychic Angler's Guide to Fishing in Streams of Consciousness*." The lie came with such ease and glibness that he smiled inwardly.

"Indeed!" Garblack said, his brows elevating. He gave Saran an empathic appraisal. "Do you have an academic background?"

"An extensive one at a number of universities, but I do not allow it to undermine my thinking. Most teachers, it has been my experience, are repositories for neatly packaged lore and precepts which gather dust in the attics of their consciousness while new and original ideas and vogues pass them by."

"Just so!" Garblack almost bellowed. His eyes blazed. "Say, what is your name?"

Saran introduced himself and Garblack pumped his

hand with glowing affability. "And you say you've been waylaid and are in need of work?" he asked.

Saran made an offhanded, fatalistic gesture.

"Well, I could use an assistant in some of the work I've undertaken," Garblack said. "If you would care, in return for a not ungenerous stipend, including room and board, to help me out, I would be most pleased."

Saran, with little urging, accepted the offer. It was agreed that he would be paid twenty-five maxims per week, plus room and board, to be employed in the capacity of general assistant and consultant in Garblack's inventive endeavors.

As Saran and Garblack left the hammock shop, with Saran carrying the new hammock (an olive-colored soft leather model rather than the netted variety: Garblack had puzzled over the two kinds, opining that netting was more evocative of associations of the craftsmanship and labor that had gone into creating the product, while the more solid model was perhaps more comfortable; he had then begun to wonder if a redundancy of comfort was an adequate factor in influencing his choice, since it might lull thought rather than stimulate it—at which point Pamplmeir had bagged the leather hammock, making his choice for him) in a bag, the rain was beginning to slacken to a mizzle. Garblack held the parasol over both of them and led the way.

"How far is it?" Saran asked.

"Near," said Garblack, and set a quick pace through the crooked streets of Expectoration Beach. It occurred to Saran that the downpour might by contrast make the ritual expectation of the people of the city seem futile, and he mentioned this to Garblack, who merely laughed and said, "Faith and reason are sited in separate spheres in the mind and may coexist but are scarcely competitive and in no sense collaborative. Faith will have weight in this instance because reason is the less heartening of the two alternatives."

They went through a shoddy section of town where the houses were all in some tawdry state of dilapidation, then came to the outskirts and crossed a series of umber hummocks in a broad meadow beyond which the land became sparsely wooded. Garblack's house, an edifice of neatly constructed and artfully hewn stone blocks with a roof of heavy logs, stood in a big clearing where the trees dripped with rain and a sudden glimmering of fugitive sunlight made the setting shine with wet green clarity.

Inside, Garblack immediately led Saran through a long, tall corridor to his quarters, namely a room as underfurnished as a moderately comfortable cell: there was a single bed made up with plain gray blankets, a night table with an oil lamp, and a small couch of black leather whose springs had collapsed on one end so that at a close glance the cushion on that end could be seen to slump slantingly forward.

Saran was tactful enough to nod approvingly as the ascetic room was disclosed, then followed Garblack into the main room, which itself was much like a large cell. The furniture was sparse and ramshackle, the decor minimal, consisting of a few dour tapestries. Later Saran

would discover that two of the big house's rooms were entirely barren and would reflect that, like many men absorbed in a world of abstracted thought, Garblack gave short shrift to the concept of creature comforts, excepting for his sartorial penchant, which was often the one thing that such men were least concerned with: he thought of the sages and mages he had known who had characteristically affected dowdy and unstylish garb.

Garblack stoked up a roistering blaze in the fireplace and pulled chairs close to it for himself and Saran. Outside it had begun to rain heavily again, and above the crackling of the log fire there was the tremulant battering of wind-driven gusts of rain against the sturdy house. Garblack poured glass goblets of purple wine and handed Saran one, which had a chip on the rim. The annoying thought of encountering a shard of glass in the wine would normally have induced him to complain, but in this instance he thought better of importuning the hospitality he had so fortuitously encountered.

"To our successful association," Garblack proposed cheerfully, raising his goblet, and Saran followed suit, and they drank.

"So tell me, Saran," Garblack said after a few moments, "what do you think?"

Saran glanced back at Garblack and echoed, "Think?" although he perceived almost simultaneously from the other's latitudinarian glow that he was delving for a statement of credo; even so, Saran considered it judicious to remain philosophically impartial until he had a hearing on Garblack's own ways of thinking. Which he would soon find were heterodox and virtually whimsical.

"I am eager to talk philosophy, one of my true joys," Garblack said. "I am by habit broad-minded, undogmatic, and given to flirtations if not impassioned trysts with ideas that fly beyond the vision of most. I wish I had read your books, which sound intriguing . . . What sort of fish, for example, do you say are found in most abundance in streams of consciousness? Certainly there are schools of red herrings and numerous minnows of perception that never find enough food for thought and so never grow to concept or become lost and languish in tributaries off the mainstream."

"Of course, it depends on the consciousness," Saran pointed out. "Many streams are polluted by ignorance or subjective learning and the fish are all sluggish and ill-colored. Other streams are full of bursting with fish of untoward, exotic varieties—gleaming minnows, opalescent salmon, sleek swordfish primed for a duel, sunfish, fish like pink stars and tropical blooms. And in most every stream there are the occasional black sharks, radiant eels, fish with teeth like daggers, and various flatfish and flukes sulking on the bottoms."

Garblack was delighted with the talk. "Saran, what do you suppose is the nature of reality and the meaning of life?" he inquired pointedly.

Saran pondered. "The nature of life is sexual," he said finally, deciding to be frank, "consisting of the universal compulsion toward sexual congress, an undertaking sufficiently pleasurable to have sponsored a recreational *raison d'être* among hedonists who prize the activity on

a nonprocreational basis. The epicurean approach to sex as fun has been derived from the physical act by people of the same sort of appetitive turn of mind and body as those who refine a gourmet's attitude toward cuisine from the primal biological compulsion to glut the gut with provender and flesh. As for the meaning of life, I tend to favor the savoring of manifold pleasures, not the least of which is zestful sexual fun with beings of the opposite gender, although the pleasures of the mind are not to be slighted—nor other sensory pleasures of a nonlibidinal sort." Here Saran drank to emphasize his point.

Garblack beamed, drank himself, and exclaimed, "My aptitude is more for mental pleasures than physical ones, but I acknowledge that pleasure is a suitable goal for anyone's life, though of course renouncing pleasure, one's own as well as that of others, constitutes a singular pleasure for many."

"Too many," Saran remarked.

"Do you subscribe to a cosmology?" Garblack asked.

Saran said drolly, "Perhaps the universe is the by-product of an overtaxed deity doing better work in another sphere—or the work of a cosmic caricaturist whose technique is radical hyperbole."

Garblack smiled rudimentarily. "God? Do you conceive of an immaterial god—or do you suppose he is a fellow with a tallywhacker like you and I?"

"Only if he created us in his likeness and we are essentially narcissistic artifacts analogous to offspring whose fathers seek to duplicate their appearance through their paternity—it is, of course, anthropocentric vanity that engenders the certainty that such is the case, with little room for the possibility that we may be an experimental or improvisational species in no wise similar to our maker."

Garblack was clearly enjoying himself greatly. He drank with so much gusto that wine ran down his chin and onto his blouse, unheeded.

Saran attempted to steer the exchange away from abstraction, although he was beginning to feel pleasantly appreciative as he articulated his views. "I would love to see your workshop," he said.

"Ummm," Garblack nodded, but said, "In time, in time. Presently I am in the process of a complicated endeavor which I would prefer not to preview. I dislike showing work until at least the likelihood of successful completion is evident. Sometimes things go awry. Soon, I hope, the current project will be ready for unveiling. But until then . . ." Garblack shook his head and chuckled lightly.

His curiosity sparked, Saran drank, studying Garblack with cool estimation over the upturned pedestal of his goblet. "And what do *you* believe?" he asked Garblack at length.

"Hummpf." Garblack pinched his chin. An odd gleam invested his eye. "Reality is pervasive, but is it all? Perhaps reality itself is merely an addendum to a sort of super-somethingness, as excrement is to its originative flesh. Perhaps we and everything are three-dimensional reflections of a six-dimensional realm. Perhaps the stars are celestial confetti—ha, ha! It may be that when I leave

the room you cease to exist, or perhaps your hairline just recedes. . . . Is my shadow mine—or am I its? And what is the origin of the lap? Is this chair real?”—Garblack struck the arm of the chair for emphasis—or is it just an illusion imposed by my posterior’s need for something to sit on?

“And what of ethics? Is it possible to define the good—or is it easier for an artist to draw a picture of it? And if goodness is so good, why then is badness sometimes more reliable? And why do good men so often have poorer taste in clothing than bad men and tell worse jokes? Is Stoicism a viable philosophy or just one to adopt when you are constipated? And if hedonism is so enjoyable, why have gender-conscious female spokeswomen not originated shedonism?”

Assailed by the barrage of questions, Saran could only nod with placid philosophical ease, as if to impart a general thoughtful consideration. His expression remained neutral, yet he recognized that Garblack’s eccentric, playful, and intense temperament struck a fine balance between the idiosyncratic and the certifiably crankish. Perhaps an optimum state of mind for an inventor, he surmised.

Garblack poured more wine into their goblets. “I’m so pleased to have you here,” he told Saran in an effusive tone. “As much as I prize the quality of my own speculations, the fact is inescapable that noninteractive thought is a form of soliloquy, and one needs the stimulation of contrasting or even parallel points of view to enliven cerebral enterprises.” Here Garblack paused and for a moment his eyes became crossed. An expression of silliness distorted his sober features. He rose, pirouetted in place, glided in a wide circle around the room with his arms extended, and then resumed his seat, continuing to speak as if nothing had happened. “For—for—for a while I had a black-and-white cat named Skewbald, but he was struck by lightning one evening while helping me conduct an experiment with a kite and a key, and since then I have been a—a—alone.” Garblack’s eyebrows shot out of synchronization, one arching to the utmost, the other veering sideways, and then, abruptly, he slumped in his chair and lay still, a peculiar smile tilting his lips.

Well, Saran thought, so begins another unpredictable enterprise. Such is life! Hum and hah. Shaking his head in amusement, he lifted Garblack’s inert body from the chair and bore it to the man’s bedroom, which, he noticed, was as colorless as his own, but larger. He tugged Garblack’s boots off, arranged him on the bed in a semblance of comfortable repose, and then went snooping about the house. The laboratory door was firmly secured, and he could find no keys anywhere. There was not much else to see in the minimally furnished house, except for quantities of books all about and a small room in which the walls were lined with bookshelves containing hundreds of eclectic volumes, many esoteric and fascinating. Saran selected one, *Blue Foods—Nature’s Omission*, and read himself to sleep. There are, he learned, no blue foods in nature, even the vaunted blueberry being a nigrescent fruit whose blue patina is a sort of cosmetic mist.

Saran was awakened in the morning by a loud hammering on his door. “Saran, hop, ho! Cheese, sweets, and fresh buns beckon. Up! The day is nigh. Come put some sunlight on your face. Sleep is an inverse vampire spewing lethargy into your veins. Animate yourself—jump to!”

Saran rose, yawned, and sallied forth. Garblack greeted him with ebullience. “The implements of elutriation are in the bath chamber, first left,” he said, pointing down the corridor. Saran went into the room and dipped his face into a pan of water, dunked his hair, washed his face, neck, and hands with a big cake of amber soap, then emerged. He joined Garblack at the table, eager to start the day. Over fragrant black coffee, spiced cheese, and plum buns, Saran inquired about his duties.

Garblack nodded and said, “If you will, I’ve a pair of snips with a screw that needs tightening, a retort or two that might be rinsed, and several nails that might be straightened out for reuse. I’ll set them on a table outside the laboratory, then see you toward the end of the day. Eat what you will from the larder, enjoy whatever surplus of time you find, and over supper we can enjoy some vivid colloquy, wot?”

Saran made an effort to linger by the laboratory door when Garblack went inside for the stipulated items, but the inventor slipped inside so deftly and quickly that he could not catch a glimpse of the interior, and when Garblack opened the door to set the small table outside, Saran saw only a half-glimpse of gray indistinct shapes. His curiosity was now at a maximum pitch. He finished his assigned work in fifteen minutes or so after Garblack went to work, then spent the rest of the day wandering the nearby woods. Toward the end of the day, with the sun setting like a sodden egg yolk in an albuminous splurge of white clouds on the horizon, Garblack shot out of the laboratory as if ejected by force.

“Good day!” he chirped. “Time for wine, eh?” He chortled. His hair looked as if it had been combed with fireworks. His smile was askew. He fetched a green bottle and two goblets from the kitchen and bade Saran follow him to the fireplace, where he again ignited a log fire. Languishing in his chair, he said, “Saran, good bo, what of other worlds?”

“Other worlds?”

“Surely this cannot be the only world. Are we unique? I would hazard that there are worlds galore. These may be in both space and time and/or some inexplicable interstices in between.” Garblack chewed a finger. “The cosmic odds surely favor a plenitude of worlds, wot?”

“It seems likely to suppose,” Saran agreed, “that life has gotten itself about, yes.”

Garblack drank enthusiastically, drenching his chin and collar with overflow. His eyes narrowed and his expression became reminiscent of that of a custodian of some private lore.

The conversation, much as the evening before, evolved along unusual lines, Garblack coaxing Saran through winds of speculation on flights of wild fancy. Saran perceived himself as a captive conversationalist and audience

of one to Garblack's ramblings; such apparently was his role here, to provide counterpoint to the inventor's weird musings. Well, he thought, there were worse terms of employment, but at the same time he knew that within a few days his restlessness would become unnerving; tedium would hound him. Surely he wanted a look at the laboratory and what it contained, and he resolved to have it, if not through gentle persuasion, then by other means.

At the end of the evening, with two empty bottles between them, Garblack poured a final dram of wine into his upturned nose, snuffled groggily, sneezed purple snarle into his vest, and reeled sideways in his chair, unconscious.

Saran searched his person. No key. He searched the house diligently. No key. Again he hove Garblack to his bedroom, thrust him abed (with less careful attention this time), and went to the laboratory. He heaved upon the door, which would not yield a bit. He kicked it gingerly. Nothing. He peered through the keyhole. Darkness. He swore and retired, reading himself to sleep with Izod Nembuto's *Semi-Anti-ism: Partial Prejudice Against General Opposition*.

In the morning the same general ritual as on the previous morning repeated itself. Again, Saran finished the modest menial tasks Garblack had set out for him (scouring an obdurate adhesive substance off a large wooden spoon and poking a needle through the clogged holes in a salt dispenser) in less than half an hour, and then again he wandered into the woods. He found a pond and skipped flat stones across its surface. One of them skipped twelve times, the high point of Saran's day.

Early that evening, when Garblack flew energetically out of the laboratory and headed for the pantry, Saran followed him and said, "Garblack, I am bored with so few duties and would rejoice at the opportunity to become your assistant in a more active way. I yearn to learn, hopefully to collaborate."

"So," Garblack nodded. "Follow." Before the fireplace, over wine, he said, "I am ready to confide my two latest inventions. Wait here!" Saran felt a surge of eagerness as Garblack departed from the room. He returned in moments with a cloth bag, then drew out from it a wooden frame whose configuration was the shape of one's shoulders, with a rod connecting the lower points and a hook at the top.

Saran was perplexed until Garblack fetched a pair of pants and a shirt, then folded the pants neatly over the rod and draped the shirt over the shoulder shapes. "I call it an apparel hook," he said with a smile. "The clothes are hung thus, the hook secured on a peg." Saran was still perplexed. It was ingenious, but in a somewhat trivial way.

Then Garblack displayed two wooden frames shaped like the bottoms of shoes and equipped at heel and toe with small polished wooden wheels, one to each side; appended to these were straps with which he secured them to the bottoms of his shoes. While Saran gaped, he sailed across the room and into the adjacent hallway, where he could be heard whizzing along; then moments

later he glided smoothly and swiftly back into the room. The locomotion was brisk and effortless, and Saran was dismayed and impressed at the same time.

"Easeful locomotion," Garblack said with a grin. He rolled to his chair and plopped down, giving Saran a look of triumph and accomplishment. "What do you say?" he asked Saran eagerly as he removed the devices from his shoes.

Saran said truthfully, "Amazing!" He looked from the apparel hook to the rolling devices. Both inventions were the essence of simplicity in design, remarkably utilitarian, and each in its way potentially revolutionary. The first would enable garments to be hung neatly and in an attractive manner that was the antithesis of the customary unsightly disarray they exhibited hanging on a wall peg or even folded over an item of furniture. The second, while apparently a novelty, contained within its design the seeds of an adaptability that might conceivably give it historic import: its energy-saving feature on floors in big houses was easily seen, but one could also extrapolate its use as an efficient portable personal conveyance in a world where roads were smoothly and flatly designed for the use of such mobile shoes.

Saran regarded Garblack in a new light, supposing that the lightning that had evidently given him his quirks had also agitated a germinal imagination.

Garblack, radiant with Saran's obvious admiration, smiled so broadly that the smile developed abruptly into a facial tic that spasmed one cheek repeatedly, spreading then to the other cheek until his whole smiling face became a concert of tremulous twitches. His hands, as if in counterpoint, began to jitter; he poured himself a goblet of wine, getting most of it in his lap in the process and guiding what remained in the goblet into his hair instead of his mouth. Soon his entire body was seized by tremors, his shoulders jerking back and forth like those of a dancing marionette. Throughout the epileptic spectacle his smile remained fixed, lunatic, chronic, while Saran complacently, though with effort, pretended as if nothing unusual was happening.

"May I propose a toast to your ingenuity," Saran said quietly, and raised his goblet. Garblack followed suit, his goblet shaking so violently in his hand that even the small residue remaining splashed out over his wrist. Saran drank, and Garblack conked himself on the forehead with the rim of his goblet, then settled back in the chair, his wide smile threatened to burst the confines of his face. Then, as suddenly as its inception, the seizure passed, and Garblack smiled at Saran with a look of resolute contemplation.

"Saran," he said, "I have decided to show you my laboratory. Your counsel and support is invaluable, deeply appreciated, and your direct assistance will be likewise, I'm sure."

Saran nodded with an expression of grateful approval.

Garblack rose and beckoned Saran to follow. At the door to the laboratory Garblack produced the mysterious key in his palm without Saran managing to see from where. Inside, while Saran waited, he lighted lamps about the room until it was bathed in soft orange light.

Saran was instantly disappointed. He had expected something along the lines of a fabulous toy shop, with exotic materials, implements, gawgaws, bibelots, and fascinating parts of marvelous contrivances in progress littered everywhere in profusion. Instead, there was simply a big wooden work table in the center of the room, with nothing on it, and a large assortment of tools hanging on one wall adjacent to another wall featuring banks of cabinets and tiered shelves holding a hundred or so jars containing nails, metal parts, and various substances and stuffs. No glorious confusion or alluring display. In one corner, perpendicular to the walls, was rigged the hammock Garblack had purchased from Pamplemeir.

"Witness!" Garblack exclaimed, and extended his arm. "This is where it happens, dear Saran. You are inside the conuopia wherein the fruit of my bountiful imagination is yielded."

Saran showed an expression of wonder. "So . . . so! And what is the next project to be?"

"I think a trifle is called for next. An amusement after the significance of the automatic shoes and clothes hanger. Although I cannot say for certain! The fact is, my imagination is a maze of paths which lead to orchards, dells, peaks, grottos, and sometimes the ostensible jaunt becomes inadvertently a trek to heroic heights."

"Whatever the course, I look forward to its conclusion," said Saran with suave ingratiating.

"Thank you, my boy," Garblack clapped Saran steadfastly on the shoulder. "And now, the dreamland fairies are tickling my mind. And so, to bed!"

Saran watched with the attention of a hunting bird as Garblack locked the door behind them, and he saw that with a sleight-of-hand motion that might have been taken as a fleeting tug at one sock, the inventor deposited the key in one of his shoes.

Saran retired to his room, where he read a book titled *Dialogue Between a Doctor of Divinity and a Professor of Marzipan* for an hour before creeping out into the house and then into Garblack's room, where he discovered the key in one of his shoes beside the bed. He hurried furtively to the laboratory, unlocked the door, lighted the lamps, and began to snoop.

He opened the doors of one of the cabinets. The shelves held a variety of things: tubes of parti-colored paints and various pastes; a pair of spectacles with lenses of such a dark green color that they muted and tinted the clarity of vision; a hand puppet in the likeness of a pink-mouthed frog with a lime-green ruff; a leek-green silk handkerchief with strings tied to each of its four corners, the other ends of the strings secured around the carved wooden figure of a man; a length of wire wrought so that it was twisted into sharp barbs at short intervals.

Intrigued, Saran opened another cabinet. It was empty save for something shrouded with a white cloth. Saran removed the cloth to reveal a huge crystal ball. He carried this to the work table, and as he set it down an image flickered blearily within: as he stared it acquired clarity and transmuted into a scene of hundreds of soldiers in olive-colored uniforms marching through a veritable deluge of serpentine confetti.

Then this picture faded and another, that of a horseman with a headress of feathers, appeared: the rider carried a longbow and as he rode swiftly along a bleak plain he prepared to fire an arrow at a shambling bovine beast a hundred or so yards ahead. The quality of the picture vacillated, going from murky to a lucidity comparable to reality.

Again the picture changed, showing a thronged arena in which two teams of tall men, most of them black, rushed back and forth across a floor in competition for the possession of a large resilient ball which they bounced rapidly up and down on the floor and tossed deftly back and forth, then tried to toss through a netted hoop at either end of the floor. Saran could imagine the cries of the massed audience as they enacted a pantomime of cheering and jeering inside the silent glass.

The picture altered again. A man in short pants sat in a tree reading a soft-covered book from whose pages he unfolded a long picture of a naked woman. Again. A line of people in various unusual costumes stood waiting to enter a building whose facade was covered with iridescent ornamental motifs simulating stars and planets. Again. A woman was pushing a metal basket on wheels past shelves replete with boxes and canisters adorned with pictures and as rife with words as a printed page; she came to the end of the shelves, turned, and ahead loomed counters piled high with extensive displays of myriad fruits and vegetables.

Awesome, Saran thought. Incredible!

From behind him a high thin cry sounded and he whirled about, startled. Garblack stood inside the laboratory door, pointing a finger. "I trusted you! This is transgression!"

"I—I—" Saran stammered, smiling foolishly. "I . . ."
"Woe and damn!" cursed Garblack, and smote the air with a fist. His face was a mask of indignant rage that printed itself fiercely on Saran's vision, excessive, inflexible—and then, suddenly, like a candle guttering, the features twisted, sagged, relaxed, and settled into a look of disconsolate resignation.

"So, so you know," Garblack said. "You know." He approached the table, where the crystal ball now disclosed a man biting a puppy's face playfully. The puppy turned, snapped, and sank flashing teeth into his nose.

"I . . ." Saran was at a loss for the proper remark.
"Yes . . . this is the source of my inventions," Garblack confessed. "This window into some world . . . elsewhere . . ." He sighed.

"A world elsewhere?" Saran asked.

"Who knows?" Garblack shrugged. "The visions are random and ilimitable. They afford glimpses into a world so highly advanced from our own as to seem magical by comparison. I have seen things in this crystal that are infinitely abstruse and far too complicated to be recreated. But a diligent vigil will reveal other things that can be deduced, copied . . ."

"Where did you get this?" Saran wanted to know.

"Hummpf. No matter." Garblack pulled at his nose. "The matter at hand is your betrayal of my confidence."

"I was merely curious," Saran said innocuously. He

picked up the crystal. "Can you blame me? My mind thirsts for knowledge. I meant nothing wrong."

"Please give me that," Garblack said firmly, and seized the ball. Yet Saran did not yield at once, and Garblack pulled him off balance. Saran let go of the crystal then and Garblack jolted to one side, falling.

The crystal ball struck the floor simultaneously with Garblack's buttocks, and there was a shattering of glass in accompaniment to the heavy thud of flesh.

"Whoops," Saran said.

Garblack opened his eyes and observed the remains of the crystal ball.

"I'm sorry," Saran said, somewhat sheepishly.

Garblack rose and stood staring at the broken glass. As he did so, the flesh of his face began to twitch slowly in a variety of contrary directions. At the same time he began to gurgle. His eyebrows shot up, his lips twisted

in an orbit of woe, his eyelashes fluttered, his cheeks underwent a ferment of tremulation. "Akkkkk!" he exclaimed, and he twirled himself across the floor, striking a stationary pose for a moment, then leaping high into the air to execute a series of excellent *entrechats*. "Hup!" he cried, and spun about the room in a circle. "Heel and toe, heel and toe . . ." He executed extravagant improvisational dance steps, arms held aloft. He danced. Danced. And, errantly, twitching and twirling, spun out of the room.

That was the last time Saran saw him, and, of course, there was not so much as a maxim to be found anywhere in the house, nor really anything of practical value at all, Garblack having snatched up his two latest inventions to carry with him as he fled from the house, emitting perfect impressions of the mating cry of the ruffled cuckold along the way. ♦

AMAZING[®]

STORIES

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Novel

The Vor Game

by Lois McMaster Bujold

Novella

The Hemingway Hoax

by Joe Haldeman

Novelette

The Manamouki

by Mike Resnick

Short Story

Bears Discover Fire

by Terry Bisson

Non-Fiction Book

How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy

by Orson Scott Card

The Character Assassin



Paul Cook

When Hazlett Crossland last spoke with Faraday, the man's "little vendettas," as he called them, had not yet gotten out of hand. But that was then. This is now.

If one is to judge purely from appearances, Lyle Faraday is an average man—average in height, average in build. He cannot be found in a crowd unless you look for him specifically. Only his hands stand out. The veins along the backs of them are the maps of a sinister landscape. Crossland knows that many have perished by those hands; he just does not know how many.

Faraday's habit is to show up at the most inopportune times. It is as if the strange

Illustration by Pat Morrissey

man has Crossland's Manhattan apartment wired for sound; his appearances are always a trifle too neat, a trifle too synchronistic.

As it is, Crossland's novel, called *The Prairie Occasion*, is years behind schedule. A full sabbatical from the college where he teaches on Long Island has only marginally helped. The more he writes, the farther the novel recedes out ahead of him. It is almost like the curse of a malevolent Muse. As such, Crossland isn't too surprised when Faraday pays him a visit.

Crossland is right in the midst of a wedding scene, that of young Sarah Fillmore and a local boy, a childhood sweetheart named Charles Willard. It is 1887, spring, and the dancers at the reception have paused to fan themselves under a balmy Kansas sun. It is an open-air ceremony. The fiddler, Josiah Blake, steps over to a stand of splayed magnolias to tighten his bow. After that he will have a glass of honey-sweetened lemonade and speak with the father of the bride, Jedidiah Willard. Crossland knows that the moment is tailor-made for a man of Faraday's bent.

Faraday appears wearing a long sable coat, one not common to the climes of Manhattan, even during winter. Snow flecks his shoulders and on his feet are oxbow boots which have tracked black soil across Crossland's carpet. And though it is May in Manhattan, Faraday has just returned from winter—winter somewhere else, somewhere far away.

And his arrival fits. For Crossland has discovered that he can go no further with the wedding scene. He momentarily forgets Josiah Blake and the church matrons who are handing out trays of marzipan to the young children there. Faraday always does this to him and he should be used to it by now. But Crossland is too much the optimist.

Faraday steps into the book-filled apartment and slides into a chair of faded, red upholstery near Crossland's desk. It's as if he needs to be physically close to the action.

Faraday draws off his gloves and points to the monitor screen. "So Charlie boy finally bagged Sarah. Nice touch having the wedding beneath the old cottonwood. I've always been partial to that tree myself. I mean, like it's right out in the middle of fucking *nouhere*, Haz. Like your book."

He laughs and Crossland feels his energy drain away.

Faraday brushes away the droplets of snow from his broad shoulders. But that's only theatre—it's the *snow* Faraday wants him to see.

"I don't recall it being winter," Crossland says.

"Oh sure, *here*," Faraday says with a wicked grin.

A coat of that style can only have come from Europe, and probably in the mid-nineteenth century. It's the kind of coat that many of the folk gathered at Sarah's wedding still own. They are, after all, of immigrant stock themselves and many can still recall the harsh European winters.

So what can it be? Crossland then asks himself. Or more specifically, *who* can it be? Who is it *this* time?

"Don't tell me," Crossland says, giving in to the game.

"The coat has to be Russian. So it must have been Gogol."

Faraday grins with three rows of teeth but he says nothing.

"Tolstoy, then," Crossland offers.

"You're not even trying, Haz. Tolstoy was last year, remember? You were right in the middle of reading the *Confession*. You thought it stunk."

But Crossland's mind has leapt out ahead of the man before him. He now knows the truth: Faraday finally got around to Dostoyevsky. Turgenev had been many years ago when Faraday first started out, and Solzhenitsyn, he knows, is for a later time when Faraday feels he's gotten sufficiently good at what he does. After all, The Plowman, Joseph Stalin, still prowls the pages of the laureate's fiction.

Faraday's gloves fall to the carpet like two slabs of meat. It is definitely Dostoyevsky.

"Don't tell me. Ivan Karamazov, right? Thought so. Close the door on your way out." He turns back to the computer screen and the wedding whirling within its RAM bits.

Faraday sits back. He is undaunted. He smiles. "My, we're testy today. Have we gone without our nap?"

Crossland glares at him. "Look, nobody invited you here."

Faraday laughs. Meanwhile all of the guests at the wedding stand waiting, sipping their lemonade, talking with the couple of the hour.

"Okay, okay. You're right. At least about Dostoyevsky. But it wasn't Ivan. I'm saving Ivan for a rainy day."

So Crossland thinks: Raskolnikov. "What did you do, Lyle?" he asks wearily.

"What do you think?"

Crossland closes his eyes, all thoughts of Kansas gone now. He stares at an old edition of *Crime and Punishment*, trying to recall its ending—the ending its author had given it. Raskolnikov, he recalls, was sent to prison in Siberia, and Sonia, the whore-Christian, had followed him there. *What else? What else is there?*

Faraday hunches over in the old chair. He says, "You'd be surprised what seven years in a labor camp can do to a man. It dulled his otherwise brilliant mind. It made it easy for me at the train station."

"There was no train station, as I recall," Crossland says to him.

But he already knows the line of Faraday's argument. The story has indeed come to an end, but the world of it still remains suspended in the mind. And Faraday goes back, back to mete out the justice which fiction rarely gives, especially to those whom Faraday has always felt deserved it but did not get it.

"I don't believe you," Crossland says. But then, Faraday's shoulders are headed with melted snow—snow which you cannot find, no matter how hard you search, anywhere in Manhattan at that time of year.

"It was in Norilsk. I was there to meet him when his train pulled into the station. So was the lovely Sonia."

Faraday walks over to Crossland's modest bar to help himself to some bourbon and ice.

"'Lovely' might not be the right word here," he says over his shoulder, leering.

Crossland can hear the hard disk in his computer whirling like a planet in its orbit: On that planet Sarah Fillmore is waiting for the dance to proceed.

"What are you talking about?" Crossland says.

Faraday rattles the ice in his drink. "You know how it is. Some guy says a character of his is 'beautiful' and we buy into it. No questions asked. Audrey Hepburn for Sonia, Elizabeth Taylor for Eustacia Vye. . . ."

Faraday's eyes widen. "Hey, *that's* a thought. Elizabeth Taylor for Eustacia Vye. Richard Burton for Damon Wildeve. I'll bet *that's* a pair Hardy would've approved of. I mean, have you seen pictures of Hardy's first wife? Jesus. . . ." He shakes his head in droll amazement.

"So what's the point?" Crossland demands.

"What's the point? I'll tell you what's the point. Some author tells us a character is 'lovely' and we believe him. Or her. We're such suckers, you know?"

"I take it Sonia wasn't Audrey Hepburn."

"Hey, Sonia wasn't even Elsa Lanchester."

Faraday returns to his chair. "I'll tell you, Haz, Ukrainian women look like cavemen." Faraday sips his bourbon, inhaling with a hiss.

Crossland thinks about this. There is some truth to Faraday's derisive words. The denizens of earlier centuries probably *were* better left to the imagination.

On a bulletin board above his desk is a faded daguerreotype of his great-grandparents as they sit on their homestead porch. From the expressions on their faces it seems as if they are surprised to be sitting there at all.

But Sarah—*his* Sarah—is not like Dostoyevsky's Sonia. She *is* beautiful, and she is still smiling coyly among her bridesmaids, holding a fragrant bouquet of yellow roses. How could a young woman like that *not* be beautiful?

"What did you do?" he finally asks.

"You really want to know?"

"No."

Faraday leans back. "I thought I'd try something really spectacular this time. Something he *deserved*."

"Lyle," Crossland repeats, "what did you do?"

"A grenade."

"A *grenade*?"

"A twentieth-century weapon for a nineteenth-century man. Is that ironic, or what?"

It is, and Crossland can easily imagine the scene. The train rattles into the station on a dismal winter afternoon, and furloughed prisoners begin to disembark. An egg-shaped object of steel and death flies up in a deadly arc. . . .

"And so you think justice is served?" Crossland says to the twisted grin before him.

"Why not?" Faraday remarks.

Crossland rises and moves into his small kitchen in need of some tea. Justice, he thinks, *justice*. He recalls how the villain Iago was keelhaunched in the Adriatic by a blue-eyed Venetian captain just days after poor Othello had been laid to rest. Or the episode of Mrs. Macomber in distant Africa—how the soft ivory of her throat collapsed to the pressure of Faraday's fingers.

And there were others: A Misfit ambushed in the hills of Georgia; a pot-mender in the Salinas Valley who had no use for chrysanthemums; a Bible salesman found beaten to death with, of all things, an artificial leg.

"I guess it is justice," Crossland admits. "In its own way."

Faraday rests his hands on his flat stomach and taps his feet together like one of the fidgety little boys at Sarah's wedding. Crossland wants to shut him out, to get on with the wedding celebration. *Sarah* wants to get on with the celebration. But by now most of the guests are beginning to think that something has gone wrong.

"You don't sound convinced," Faraday says.

"I'm not."

"You're such a happy guy, Haz. You know that?"

Crossland glares at him, pouring tea. "This isn't about me."

"It's not? I thought it was."

Faraday is doing it to him again, goading him like this. It's what the man needed—that psychopathic boost to send him away. *To send him back*. Crossland closes his eyes, feeling a great and unappeasable sadness ripple through himself.

And what would it be next time? American, perhaps? Would a blue-eyed orchard guard finally put the Joads out of their misery? Would a grinning taxi driver run down Lady Brett along the Boulevard Montparnasse some languid afternoon in Paris? Would Holden Caulfield be done in by a blue-eyed phony who was, in the end, no phony at all? The menu, Crossland imagines, is quite extensive. Faraday could dine on it for some time to come.

Faraday rises from his chair. In his Siberian greatcoat he looks like a man-sized bat with black, folded wings: He has done all he needs to do today. The weight of despair and defeat that Crossland feels is almost enough to push him four floors down through his apartment into the earth below.

It is time for Faraday to go, his work done for the day, the wedding held in stasis.

But even as the man prepares to go, Crossland sees dust on the horizon. He had not anticipated much by way of action that day, just the wedding. Certainly he hadn't envisioned a storm. But Faraday, as always, has interrupted all that.

"Just leave," Crossland says wearily. "You are not welcome here."

"If I wasn't welcome," Faraday says, "I wouldn't be here. I'm here because you *want* me to be here."

"I will never believe that," Crossland counters.

Faraday buttons his greatcoat, then slips on his gloves. *It's back to Russia somewhere. Or perhaps Europe*. He smiles. "I'm here because of all that is missing in your life, Haz."

He turns. "And what might that be?"

"A sense of justice, my friend. How there is so little of it in your world. Face it, Haz. Your quarrel's with God, not with me. I only do what you *wish* you could do."

Crossland is visibly shaken now. Faraday needed to be recharged, like a battery cell, and now he was all

fired up and ready to go. Crossland sees it in Faraday's bright grin.

But he also sees banners of dust beyond the fields to the west. Crossland can't possibly imagine what it might be, for the sky is as clear over Kansas as it is over New York.

"Just leave me alone," Crossland tells him. But he is drained now. He knows, as does Sarah, that the complete celebration will have to be postponed.

And that will undoubtedly change the entire scheme of things, bring to it a different chemistry the next time he sat down before the monitor and keyboard, a different rhythm to the narrative altogether.

By then Charles Willard might get cold feet and reconsider. A jealous lover from the past might reappear. The wedding reconsidered, Sarah's life might take some different course altogether. There is no telling how the chapter might be transformed.

Faraday leaves, and his laughter hovers in the air of Crossland's apartment like motes of age-old dust.

The dust. But Crossland is puzzled by the dust—the dust and the distant thunder that comes with it. Why is the scene so hard to complete? Why is the novel so hard to complete? Is his quarrel with God? Or is it with himself, unwilling to face the realities of his creations?

Crossland does not hear him go, but like the calamity on the far horizon, Faraday is always there at the outer edge of his consciousness.

But then, Crossland thinks, perhaps the story does have an ending; perhaps it does have its own sense of justice, territorial as it might be.

Crossland sets aside his cup of jasmine tea and turns to the novel and ponders the world of his making. As he does, a stranger with intense blue eyes and dark greatcoat stumbles out of nowhere and falls amid the guests at the reception. Indeed, he lands quite close to Josiah Blake.

But Farmer Blake is distracted. He has just then noticed the whirling dust beyond the nearby ridge.

"Good Lord!" he cries out, pointing over the heads of a group of civic leaders. This diverts their attention from the stranger who is struggling to his feet, glancing around him.

Several of the women scream, but not because of the man in the greatcoat. There is a different horror being visited upon them and they have just now seen it.

Comanches on horseback, dappled and feathered, come riding down the far ridge, and they are herding an enormous swell of bison out before them. The terrible stampede descends upon them all.

Is *this* justice? Crossland wonders. Or is this a part of living on the earth that only *seems* unfair?

The farmers run for their lives. They have forgotten about the newcomer who is now trying to understand what has just happened to him.

But then, a bullet catches him painfully in the leg and he falls to the ground, far from the safety of the lone cottonwood where Charles Willard has just shoved his new bride.

The herd of monstrous beasts—each twice as tall as a man—crashes across the clearing. Chairs, flower stands, even the pinewood pulpit Reverend Hummer had built for the occasion, erupt like so many broken bones. A wagon with its brace of horses goes under as well. A fog of dust occludes their lives.

Very few of the farmers, Crossland now knows, will survive. This would also include the stranger in the heavy coat and the oxbow boots. In fact, there will be little left of him that will be recognizable, and this will always be a mystery to them when the tragedy is recalled as the years go by.

Crossland studies the city beyond his window, not really seeing the spires of Manhattan at all. The farmers—those who survive—will go on to rebuild their lives amid all the unanswerable questions that plague them. He knows this as much as he now knows that justice is rarely served in any universe. This is the only truth which even Sarah Fillmore comprehends, though at the moment she is years away from such a revelation.

For even as Crossland returns to the kitchen for another cup of tea, he knows there will always be tragic occasions such as these. And so does young Sarah Fillmore, who now weeps over the pulped remains of her family and friends, cursing God under a yellow Kansas sun. ♦

The Bard Effect



Bridget McKenna

"My God, Doctor, that's a lot of chimps!"

The visitors stood with Dr. Martinez on a steel catwalk overlooking row upon row of desks on which rested row upon row of computers in front of which sat row upon row of chimpanzees, fading off to a vanishing point somewhere in the misty distance of the moist San Diego air.

"Yes," Dr. Martinez agreed. "It certainly is." She glanced at her watch. "Dr. Canfield will be ready to see you in about thirty minutes, so let's begin our tour with the chimps." She led her three charges down the metal steps, their footfalls ringing and resounding in the vast spaces of the old aircraft plant.

"We started out with thirty-six chimps and a dozen computers, back in our old headquarters, running three shifts a

Illustration by Janet Auliso

day. Dr. Canfield has gone out for more funding every year to increase the number. Of course that also increases the number of assistants needed to oversee and care for them." She waved a hand at the dozens of white-coated figures who walked up and down the aisles between the desks, stopping now and again to talk to a chimp, taking something out of a pocket and putting it into a small brown hand.

"This is really a very impressive setup, Dr. Martinez," commented Ms. Gold of the National Science Foundation as they stepped down onto a cement floor the size of several football fields. "But are you actually teaching them to write?"

"Under the terms of our grants from your organization, what we're trying to accomplish here is to enable our subjects to communicate through the use of specially designed computer keyboards in increasingly complex sentences. We'll be seeing some examples of this in just a minute." They walked down an aisle on either side of which were desks and chairs, each chair occupied by a small hairy operator. "As you can see, some of the keyboards have as few as four keys. Each of these represents a basic sentence idea expressed in one word. The first level of language the chimps work with is the one most natural to them—the appeal."

"You mean like begging for something?" That was Mr. Johnson from the Department of Labor.

"In a way. Most animal language consists of various appeals, such as when your cat meows at you to be petted, or fed, or let out. Essentially these are one-word statements consisting of a verb alone. In the case of a cat, you might more accurately call them orders." A couple of cat lovers laughed obligingly.

"Jackie here has moved from verb-alone statements to statements including an object. You'll notice that her keyboard is more complex." They had stopped beside a young chimp whose keyboard consisted of perhaps two dozen large keys engraved with simple pictographs and matching words in large letters. A yellow plastic dog tag the size of a playing card hung around her neck, engraved with her name in thick black letters. "Jackie, will you type a statement for our friends here? I have a chip for you."

Dr. Martinez reached into one of the large pockets of her lab coat and withdrew a wrinkled disc with a circle of black spots in the center.

"What's that?" inquired Mr. Aronsen of the Defense Department, poking a finger at it.

"Dehydrated banana chip. Our basic reward. No messy peels." Dr. Martinez turned back to Jackie. "How about it, Jackie? A statement for a chip?"

Jackie held an index finger high over her keyboard, as though considering her choices. Finally she pressed a key. The word 'Jackie' appeared on the monitor in large letters. Jackie pointed to the screen, then to her chest.

"That's right, Jackie. That's your name. Very good. Now, how about the rest of the statement? What do you want to say about Jackie?"

Jackie considered this for a moment, then pressed another key:

'good'

"Yes, Jackie is good. Good job, Jackie." She gave the chimp a hug, then handed her the chip. "She's really making excellent progress in the short time she's been with the project."

"I confess I haven't been keeping up with this particular project," Mr. Johnson confessed. "I thought you were teaching the chimps sign language."

"Chimps and gorillas have been shown to be quite adept at learning sign language, and as a matter of fact that's how we know they can learn more complex languages than lower animals. The drawback to sign language is how few people can communicate with it. Given sufficient motor skills, which these chimps have, an ape that has a good understanding of both spoken and written English could perform in the workplace alongside humans."

The visitors nodded thoughtfully.

"Gorillas are actually better students," she continued, "But not many people would be comfortable working next to one. Chimps are less threatening to the average person. Now I'd like to show you the kind of results that are possible when a student masters an alphabetic keyboard. Let's go visit Harold."

A few rows over sat a large male whose tag, reading HAROLD, was thrown over his back as he bent low over his computer. He was working a more complex keyboard, which included the entire alphabet and several punctuation marks.

"Now we'll get to see some relatively complex statements," Dr. Martinez announced.

"What about this one?" asked Mr. Johnson. "What does this red tag mean?"

The chimp in question, seated just behind Harold, was wearing a yellow I.D. tag that proclaimed his name to be BILLY and a large red cardboard tag reading "Deliver to S.D.Z.G. 04.14." He glanced up at the visitors, then regarded his nails with a sigh.

"Four fourteen," said Mr. Aronsen. "Does that refer to today's date?"

"Where's the little fellow going?" asked Ms. Gold.

Dr. Martinez came to stand beside Billy with the others. "Billy is leaving us today for the San Diego Zoo primate house. In a way, he's much luckier than the rest of these little guys—he's going to live out a long and happy life as a normal chimpanzee."

Billy whuffed and fingered his keyboard listlessly. "I guess it's normal to get a subject every now and then that just can't learn," said Mr. Johnson.

"It is," replied Dr. Martinez, "but that's not Billy's problem. Quite the contrary, in fact—Billy here was our star pupil for almost a year. He learned faster and better than any chimp in his age group. We had high hopes for Billy." She rested a hand on the chimp's head. He patted it gently with one of his.

"So what happened?" asked Ms. Gold.

"It was probably preventable—a foolish mistake on our part. Dr. Canfield and I were so excited by Billy's progress that we may have tried to accelerate him too quickly. We exposed him to some pretty sophisticated

talking software in addition to his regular tutorials, gave him unlimited access to his audio library, and let him make his own hours. Pretty soon he'd worked his way through most of our talking books and was hardly leaving his computer except to eat and sleep.

"In the end, though, it only confused him. For several months now he's been writing nonsense; random words strung together with no attempt at structure. Watch."

She bent down and met the chimp's eyes. "Billy, would you like to type a statement for our guests?"

Billy brightened considerably. He bounced a bit on his chair and poised his fingers over the keys. The visitors watched as the words appeared onscreen:

"Gnaw whiz that I'm foe rowel goat mint too calm two Theda there parting."

"See what I mean? Random noise. Totally useless for our purposes." She smiled sadly at Billy and handed him a banana chip. Billy grinned a chimp-grin full of teeth and gums, and began to type some more:

"Thug whig bran fogs chump Dover tar lace seed hog."

"Well, look there," observed Mr. Aronsen, "He's capitalized the first words of each sentence, and put periods at the end."

"He may have retained some of the basic rules," said Dr. Martinez, "but it's still meaningless. Nothing we've been able to do has got him back on track. Dr. Canfield says his space has got to go to a new chimp that has some hope of learning the system." She gave Billy a second chip and turned back to Harold. Billy hooted and kept typing.

"Now Harold here has really got the right idea. His statements now consist of up to three elements." She scratched Harold's furry scalp; he squirmed with delight. "Would you please type a statement for me, Harold? That's a good boy."

Harold banged at his keyboard with two meaty index fingers:

"Harold smart ape. Smart chimp. Give me banana."

"He still has a few parts of speech to master," said Dr.

Martinez. "He has no concept of articles or the verb 'to be' in the present tense, but then the Russian language gets by without either of those concepts."

"You teach that ape to speak Russian," said Mr. Aronsen, "and I can get him a job with the C.I.A."

Everyone laughed.

Billy had been typing the whole time. Now he jumped up and down on his chair and hooted until he had Dr. Martinez's attention again.

"Oh, all right, Billy. As long as you work here, you get paid just like everyone else. Let's see what you've got for me this time."

Billy pursed his lips and emitted a crooning sound. He pointed at her pocket and then at his monitor, which displayed the words:

"Watson inane? Dad twitch recall arrows biennial then aim wooed small is wheat."

"Butts off! Wart lot true yawn Darwin doe bricks? Eddie's tea yeast, in jewel yet east door sawn."

"Okay, okay, Billy. Enough. Here's your reward. Two statements, two chips. That's the deal. I'm going to miss you, pal." She handed over the chips and held out her arms. Billy stood up in his chair and put his arms around her neck, petting her hair as he chewed his reward.

An assistant came up. "Dr. Martinez, the driver's here to take Billy to the zoo, and Dr. Canfield is still in conference with the vet staff. Will you sign him out?"

"Of course." She wiped at her eyes with a sleeve and took the pen and clipboard as a driver in red coveralls approached with a nylon collar and leash. She scrawled her initials in the space provided and handed back the clipboard. The driver clipped the collar onto Billy's neck.

Billy patted Dr. Martinez's pocket. There was a dry rustling of banana chips. He turned back to the keyboard and typed a last statement:

"Doobie are gnaw doobie. Daddies tea quest John."

He held out his hand for his chip, then took the driver's finger and walked down the endless row of chimpanzees, waving occasionally to a friend on his way to the door. ♦

The Most Famous SF Writer on the Planet Isknif

Mike Curry

15 August 2495 Earth

Dear Yu-Ilimir (if that's your name):

We are unable to read the ideographic writing of the science-fiction manuscript (if that's what it is) that you hyperfaxed to us from Isknif (if that's your planet's name).

Submissions to *Starworlds* are encouraged from writers on other planets. My Associate Editors and I have a policy of clarifying our reasons when we reject extraterrestrial material, when the rejection is the

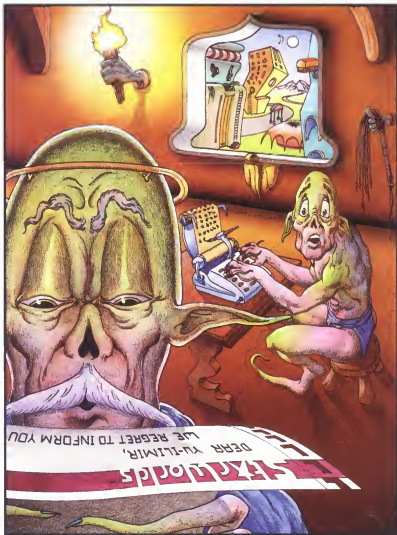


Illustration by Scott Rosema

result of what we would call "interplanetary culture/technology shock."

However, all submissions must be processed in Easy-Eye Lasertrak #2, and in one specific Earth language only, Common American Terminology, or CAT.

This release is processed in CAT, accompanied by an identical release in Galactalingua.

Yours truly,

JACK HANKS
Editor, *Starworlds*

15 August 2495

INTEROFFICE MEMO

From: Jack Hanks
To: Jenny Kapa'a, Extraterrestrials Department

Kindly advise if this story facsimile in an unknown language and its address of origin, a planet apparently named Iskniif, are for real.

And if so, did I waste my time processing the enclosed? How do we know if this Yu-Ilimir can read either version?

16 August 2495

INTEROFFICE MEMO

From: Jenny Kapa'a
To: Jack Hanks

Without knowing the identity of the star, the people at Mount Hakeakala couldn't tell you if there's a planet named Iskniif or not. They say they never heard of it.

Also, there is no Iskniif listed in the New Harvard catalogue of Intelligent Life in the Galaxy.

However, not to worry, Jack. We found Iskniif for you. Actually it was one of those smartass kid geniuses who discovered how to computer-access the hyperspectrum who found Iskniif and a he, she or it named Yu-Ilimir too.

This genius's name is Arvin Jackson. He lives in Great New York. A year ago during a series of random sweeps through the hyperspectrum he made first contact with Yu-Ilimir. They kept at it, and in time Arvin learned the Iskniif language, though Yu-Ilimir wasn't interested in learning CAT.

Since hyperspec contact isn't at all like taking a shuttle ride down from a starship right there in orbit, we don't know where Iskniif is, though it's probably somewhere along the galaxy's Orion arm.

It happened that Yu-Ilimir is a science-fiction writer on Iskniif. Isn't everybody everywhere? He's also a scientist, and he discovered the hyperspectrum there. When Arvin told him *Starworlds* is the great science-fiction mag on Earth, Yu-Ilimir asked him if we published writers

from other planets. Arvin told him we do, and instructed him to fax whatever he had directly to the *Starworlds* terminal here. He forgot to tell Yu-Ilimir the stories had to be processed in CAT.

Knowing how you like to know something about the backgrounds of your extraterrestrial writers, I squeezed as much out of Arvin as he knew. Of course Arvin's vision of Iskniif is filtered through Yu-Ilimir's own vision of his homeland, but I got a kind of surreal picture that Iskniif's culture, or at least the culture Yu-Ilimir is immersed in, is a mix of science and superstition, a dark dreamworld of omens, curses, fortune tellers, taboos—a voodoo planet.

Their society is stratified into rigid caste systems ranging from power and privilege all the way down to slavery. And Yu-Ilimir is an upper-caste big wheel known more for his science-fiction than for his science. I think that's pretty strange, since discovering the hyperspectrum should have made Yu-Ilimir world-famous there. But apparently science-fiction is more popular on Iskniif than science is, though they're about on the same technological level as we are.

There aren't even any science magazines being published there. It's as if the average Iskniifian can't distinguish science from fantasy. Sounds pretty weird.

They are a closed civilization. They have starflight/jump capability, but starflight is taboo. Visitors from the stars aren't welcome. If you suddenly showed your face around there you wouldn't be shot, but you'd probably be ignored. Or asked to leave. They aren't interested in intelligent life elsewhere in the galaxy. Yu-Ilimir seems to be a maverick. The Iskniifians seem to exist in a separate reality.

Hope this helps. We'll hyper out your release to Yu-Ilimir this afternoon, and send a copy to Arvin Jackson. Arvin is your standard "faithful reader" of *Starworlds*, and was ecstatic when I asked him to help us out and teach Yu-Ilimir CAT.

You better forget your requirement for submissions in EasyEye Lasertrak #2 from Iskniif and be happy if you get one in readable CAT. The Galactalingua version isn't necessary.

8 October 2495E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

We have given your manuscript, "Beyond Infinity," as careful a reading as is humanly possible, and regret to inform you that numerous anomalies and irregularities in your use of CAT make the sense of your story impenetrable.

May we suggest you refrain from submitting any more stories until you have finished the CAT lessons that Arvin Jackson has so kindly consented to provide you with?

Sincerely,

JH

Mike Curry

8 April 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

We have read your latest effort, "Recreation Planet," with interest, and congratulate you for having finished your CAT lessons with Arvin Jackson so successfully that we can at least read your stuff.

Regretfully though, we are unable to accept it. *Starworlds*, the preeminent science-fiction magazine in the eastern galaxy with a circulation of over 35,000,000 on more planets than we can count, publishes what are generally known as "hard science-fiction" stories.

This means that the science in our stories must be accurate, or else be plausible extrapolations of universal scientific fact, though we are not totally inflexible about this policy. However, you have located the planet in your story at such a distance from its sun that for humans from Earth it would exceed its mass limit of habitability. As a consequence, it would have a reducing atmosphere of hydrogen-ammonia-methane and quite possibly no solid surface. True, non-Earth humans could inhabit such a place, but that's not the point. The point is, the planet is a totally impossible location for the ski resort in your story.

It is our understanding that you are a scientist as well as a science-fiction writer. How could you possibly screw up like this?

In amazement,

JH

12 April 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

In answer to your hyperfax of 177 *Isei*, we must advise you that your demand for a retraction of our rejection of "Recreation Planet," based on your claim that you are the legendary Yu-Ilimir, most famous science-fiction writer on the planet Iskniif, and that whatever Yu-Ilimir writes, editors accept, is regretfully unacceptable at *Starworlds*.

The stories that made you famous on Iskniif may not be publishable on Earth, apart from their intrinsic literary merit, for the simple reason that what passes for science-fiction on Iskniif may not be valid science-fiction on Earth, and we can't tell you what would constitute "interplanetary C/T shock" until we see it.

As for your complaint that we do not return your rejected manuscripts, we do not ordinarily return manuscripts by writers from other planets. Surely you are aware that any written material that is hypertransmitted is a facsimile only, and we see no point in faxing you back a fax of a fax.

However, we are willing to acknowledge that your

request may be imbedded in some symbolism that we are unaware of, so if you prepay the charges, we'll try to make you happy.

Sincerely,

JH

24 May 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

Regretfully, we must return a fax of your latest effort, "The Beast from the Gray Hole." Although the action of your story takes place on a planet biocompatible with Earth, your depiction of your hero's anatomophysiology is too incomprehensible for our readers.

We at *Starworlds* refer to intelligent humans or non-humans in the universe who don't look much like we do on Earth and are usually malevolent anyhow by the somewhat archaic but humorous term, "Bug-Eyed Monsters."

We're very touchy about accepting Bug-Eyed Monster stories. Earth's great evolutionary biologist, Doctor Hugo Sachs, is the author of the Parallelism Theory of the evolution of intelligent life on Earth-biocompatible planets. This theory concludes that all such intelligent beings are bilaterally symmetrical, upright-walking vertebrates just like we are on Earth. The theory has been verified time and again as the starships of Earth's United Civilization's Exploration Command jump from one Earth biocomp to the next.

Therefore, to prevent such stories from becoming fantasy, which we do not publish, the writer must provide the convincing planetary environment and/or evolutionary justification to make his Bug-Eyed Monsters credible, if not necessarily likable. This, your story failed to accomplish.

Keep trying!

JH

29 May 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

With regard to your hyperfax of 209 *Isei*, we categorically deny your accusation of racism as being the cause of our rejection of "The Beast from the Gray Hole." It was your hero we called a Bug-Eyed Monster, not you. Perhaps our May 24 hyperfax was ambiguous, so we will say it again as clearly as possible:

Although we would certainly accept any story that literally blew our minds, we do not ordinarily care to publish stories about Bug-Eyed Monsters, but would have nothing against publishing plausible stories by Bug-Eyed Monsters if there ever turn out to be any, as long as they aren't implausible stories about Bug-Eyed Monsters.

An analysis of the picfax of yourself that accompanied your hyperfax shows that while your anatomical deviations from the Earth norm are readily apparent, you are still upright and bipedal and in no way could be characterized as bug-eyed.

So if we offended you by inadvertently insulting you, we apologize. It wouldn't hurt if you would try to lighten up a little.

Sincerely,

JH

5 July 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

We must reject your story, "The Smoking Dragon." Because electric power was developed before steam power on Iskniif, you envisioned a planet upon which steam power developed first, resulting in the appearance of gigantic, smoke-belching, coal-burning, multiwheeled tracked engines for transporting passengers or freight, inspiring terror and causing revolution throughout the country.

As we indicated in a general way to you already, what is science-fiction on Iskniif is science-fact on Earth. That was exactly the way steam-powered locomotives as we called them—your Smoking Dragons, our Iron Horses—developed here on Earth back in the 19th and 20th centuries, before the advent of magnetically levitated transport systems.

Have you considered researching the order of technological progress on other known inhabited planets of the galaxy before going off on any more tangents?

Hopefully,

JH

10 July 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

In reply to your hyperfax of 22 *Oodnur* protesting our rejection of "The Smoking Dragon," we asked your correspondent on Earth, Arvin Jackson, who knows you much better than we do, if there could be any truth to your assertion that the slave in your personal stable who actually wrote the basic story to which you applied the finishing touches that allegedly made it yours, would be executed if we did not accept it.

Arvin advised us it was merely your little joke. "Iskniif's living legend," Arvin told us, undoubtedly with a straight face, "feels he's entitled to a little joke now and then. The slave would not be executed. Just beaten a little."

You should be ashamed of yourself, ignoring what we had thought to be a helpful rejection and resorting

to such ghoulish tactics to try to get published on Earth.

What do you think of this tactic: quit your bitching and read a few issues of *Starworlds*?

In disappointment,

JH

15 July 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

We received your hyperfaxed order for a subscription to *Starworlds*, a bunch of back issues and a copy of our *Guidelines for Writers*. That latter document has a chapter devoted to the problems faced by writers on other planets trying to sell to *Starworlds*, but in the face of continued and unexpected intensities of "interplanetary C/T shock," it is turning out to be inadequate and is currently undergoing revision. Our problems with you are going to figure prominently in this revision.

We'll send you a fax of the current *Guidelines* anyhow, and the revised version when available. Our Extraterrestrials Department will be pleased to process your requests immediately into the hyperspectrum. The Finance Office of the E.D. will contact you in an effort to figure out the complexities of how you're going to make payment. That's not the editor's job. Thankfully.

And I might add, it's high time you began to get on the ball.

Gratefully,

JH

5 September 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

We advised you in our hyperfax of 8 April that *Starworlds* publishes hard science-fiction stories. We should have told you also that we do not publish textbooks in theoretical physics.

Therefore, we must reject your latest, "Breakthrough." There is no action whatsoever in this story. All your hero does is speculate on the complexities of the cosmic ray spectrum, launch a monologue on the various kinetic energy levels of primary extragalactic cosmic rays, make uninformed remarks about the increase in density of positron particles traveling at the speed of light (cosmic rays, including positrons, do not travel at the speed of light). Besides which, your hero reflects endlessly upon their supposed relevance to the imminent emergence of an anti-galaxy from its own upper dimensional quantum reality into our own Milky Way.

As if that wasn't inappropriate enough, you inserted right into the middle of your diatribe five pages of equations. While you are to be commended for taking the

trouble to learn how to process what passes for physics equations in Common American Science Terminology, these five pages of meaningless equations stopped what story there was stone cold dead in its tracks.

"Plausible extrapolations of universal scientific fact" doesn't mean you have to dream up implausible extrapolations of the math in a misguided attempt to add spurious authenticity to a science-fiction story.

Get smart!

JH

20 November 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

We have shredded the fax of your latest effort, "Night-fall," with the demand that you make no attempt to peddle it anywhere else in or out of the galaxy. The story illustrates a deadly problem faced by non-Earth writers who don't do their homework, yet are seeking an Earth audience.

The concept of a world of intelligent beings who live on a planet of six suns, who experience darkness only once every two thousand years due to an eclipsing line-up of suns, and the effects on the population when this occurs, has been famous all over the eastern galaxy, obviously with the exception of Iskniif, for over five hundred years.

It was first written and later expanded under the identical title by one of Earth's all-time greatest science-fiction writers, Isaac Asimov, who wrote in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Since our Extraterrestrials Department has advised us that none of Doctor Asimov's works, right up to and including his final book before retiring, *Opus 1000*, were ever translated into any Iskniifian language, we will put it down to coincidence.

You better get hold of some of the science-fiction encyclopedias and reference works published on Earth describing the great sf stories by our great authors.

Move it!

JH

28 December 2496E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

We are pleased to inform you that we like your short story, "The Radiation Anomalies," and are accepting it for publication in *Starworlds*.

Payment of 25,000 galactic dollars, or galdols, for First Eastern Galactic Magazine Rights is to be made within two weeks.

How this payment translates meaningfully into Iskniif-

ian currency, and how we'll get it to you, is up to our Extraterrestrials Department.

With best wishes,

JH

2 January 2497E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

We cannot accept your hyperfaxed promise of a payment to *Starworlds* of 25,000 *axmars*, or Earth equivalent, for accepting your story, "The Radiation Anomalies."

Regardless of what is done on Iskniif, among reputable publishers on Earth it is the publisher who pays the author, not the author who pays the publisher to get published.

And it is quite unnecessary for you to hyperfax a picture to us showing you placing upon your transcendence platform your little vial containing the tears of joy you shed for having had your story accepted. Just set free the slave who wrote it.

Expectantly,

JH

15 January 2497E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

Replying to your latest complaint, although we respect your reliance upon the guidance of your Totem Queen, we cannot allow your Totem Queen to influence our decision as to how much to pay you for a story.

Twenty-five thousand galdols (or Iskniifian equivalent) for your 5,000-word story comes to 5 galdols (or Iskniifian equivalent) a word, which is the standard payment for a first sale to us. How famous you happen to be on Iskniif melts no ice with us at all. We are paying you what we find your story is worth, *and not a cent less*.

So when our Finance Office sends you whatever they send you as payment, kindly cash it, and whatever your Totem Queen feels is excessive, donate it to her!

Good luck!

JH

20 January 2497E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

Hyperfaxed herewith are three copies of the contract to publish your story, "The Radiation Anomalies." The

contract specifies that the story is original and has not previously been published anywhere else in any form in any language. Kindly keep one copy for yourself, sign the other two and fax both back to us at your earliest convenience.

Yours truly,

JH

30 January 2497E

Dear Yu-Ilimir:

To the horror of our Extraterrestrials Department and ourselves, they have discovered from confidential sources not connected with Arvin Jackson that your story, "The Radiation Anomalies," was published one of your years ago on Iskniif in not just one, but *six*, Iskniif science-fiction magazines simultaneously.

We contacted Arvin Jackson again, who swore up and down that he knew nothing of this and if he did, he'd have certainly warned us. After making further inquiries of sources Arvin has developed on Iskniif, we learned that simultaneous publication of an author's work in competing magazines on Iskniif is common practice; and moreover, the concepts of "rights" and "copyright" are unknown on Iskniif because, to quote Arvin, "the Iskniifians consider themselves to be such upright pillars of society." Indeed!

As if that weren't enough misery for one morning, when I decided to viz the editors of the other ten major science-fiction mags on Earth to find out what the hell might be going on between you and them, I was progressively more stunned to learn that "The Radiation Anomalies" had been submitted simultaneously to six besides *Starworlds*—one accepted the story outright, two asked for revisions and three, wiser than the rest of us, rejected the thing.

Our lawyers have advised us to wash our hands of this disaster. And you better know that when the other six editors on Earth found out what you've been up to, they lost no time advising me they want nothing more to do with you.

Starworlds is hereby rejecting "The Radiation Anomalies" and we have shredded the fax of it on hand.

Our contract means exactly what it says: "Not previously published anywhere else in any form in any language."

We refuse to consider manuscripts from any writer who pays no attention to rights or copyrights regardless of his native custom; who makes not only simultaneous submissions—which is rotten enough—but thinks nothing of making indiscriminate and unlimited simultaneous sales of the same story; and worst of all, who makes slaves out of writers, appropriates their creative efforts, and punishes them if their stories do not sell.

Therefore, kindly do not submit any more stories to *Starworlds*. The stories thus will not have to be rejected,

and your writer-slaves will not have to be beaten a little, not on our account anyway.

You should consult with your Totem Queen as to whether she thinks you should honor your obligation to return our payment.

Sorrowfully,

JH

1 February 2497E

Yu-Ilimir:

In answer to your latest and I hope final outburst, it will do no good for you to intercede with your Totem Queen to place a curse calling for extinction upon our circulation.

Your plan to disregard custom and taboo on Iskniif and make the jump to Earth personally next Earth month after your Rejuvenation Phase, accompanied by your Totem Queen and her retinue of Vestal Manipulators in an attempt to realign my synaptic discontinuities, as you so ungraciously phrased it, which would allegedly permit me to realize my shortcomings as an editor and permit you to take over, has given me a clear insight as to how you got to become so legendary on Iskniif. And you better believe it's not going to happen on Earth.

Kindly be advised that the offices of *Starworlds* will be closed during the time of your visit. My staff and I will be attending a GalactiCon which I am currently in the process of setting up, somewhere the other side of Sagittarius.

In disgust,

JH

10 April 2497

Dear Fritz:

Thanks for your card from Titan. Just the place I'd expect a Nobel laureate theoretical physics professor and discoverer of the relativity-quantum connection to spend his vacation. Me, I'll take Kaanapali. Sandy and I are both looking forward to seeing you and Vickie at the class reunion. We plan to be in Princeton October 8th. If there's going to be an October 8th.

I know you're planning to take the jump home on the 17th, but I need to get this off to you ASAP because I need your help. In fact, I think it's a good possibility that every sentient being in the entire galaxy is going to need the help of every physicist we can round up.

So what's bugging me? A news item, which you probably haven't seen yet on Titan, is bugging me. It just appeared in the astrophysics dailies and is already the hot

topic worldwide. Scientists at Cal Tech just discovered an upsurge in the density of primary cosmic ray positrons of extragalactic origin moving—get this—at the speed of light. Nobody but nobody has a clue to what it means.

When I read that I felt a cold chill that shook me right out of my socks. Because seven months ago a writer named Yu-Ilimir on a planet named Isknif sent me a science-fiction story called "Breakthrough," which I rejected for various reasons, the major ones being that the story was too static and technical even for science-fiction and also, because physics equations have no place in sf stories. I'm enclosing a fax of the story plus the equations in it. You better read it.

Since the day I rejected the story, I've been wondering why I held onto it. Maybe because the courses I took in theoretical physics way back when instinctively make me keep anything with equations in it; maybe because somewhere deep in my mind, I felt the story was too technical to be purely fiction, though with constant publishing deadlines on my back, I never got around to looking into it. Anyhow, when I read that astrophysics item, I nearly shredded my files till I found the story. I tried to reach Yu-Ilimir, but we more or less hate each other's guts and I got no answer.

So here's the problem, Fritz: could Yu-Ilimir's equations be a proof, as he states in his story, of the increased cosmic ray positron density signaling the imminent emergence of an anti-galaxy from its own space-time continuum to crash head-on into ours? I keep thinking: positrons are anti-particles, and anti-particles could make anti-galaxies.

I'm not up on physics math any more since I quit studying it in favor of editing. Would you and your brother and sister think-tank geniuses take a good hard look at Yu-Ilimir's equations?

What do you think of "Breakthrough" for far-out science-fiction?

Is it, Fritz? Fiction, I mean?

And does the whole thing mean something, or does it mean nothing?

And—what would Yu-Ilimir mean by imminent? Geologically imminent? Or—*imminent*?

And if it means something, and if it's *imminent*...

Anxiously,

Jack *

Ready . . . Aim . . . Write!

If you're a reader with something to say, and you're willing to share your thoughts in writing, we want to hear from you. Please send us a letter or a postcard—we do read every piece of mail we receive, and we try to respond as often and as promptly as we can.

Comments on the magazine and its content are especially welcome now that AMAZING® Stories is coming out in a full-size, full-color format—we want to find out what you think of the new look. If it's not what you expected, then what *did* you expect? Which stories and features did you like, and which ones could you do without? The feedback we get over the next few months will play an important role in shaping the future of the magazine.

As much as we would enjoy reading compliments, we're even more interested in criticism—so if you have a negative reaction to something about this magazine, don't keep it to yourself. Before we can fix a problem, we have to be told that it *is* a problem.

We will consider any letter of comment and criticism to be eligible for publication, unless you specifically say in your letter that you *don't* want it printed. An unsigned letter will not be considered for publication, but we will withhold a writer's name on request. If you give us your full mailing address when you write and your letter is printed, we'll send you a complimentary issue of the magazine in which it appears.

If you want to be a contributor, either as a writer or an illustrator, please read the "Submissions" paragraph in the small type on page 3 of this issue. If you're sending in for our fiction writers' guidelines, please write "Guidelines" in the corner of the envelope.

If you're about to move and you want us to be able to keep track of you, please notify us of your change of address as promptly as you can. If you're a subscriber, write "Subscription Dept." on the envelope.

If you have more than one reason for writing, it's better to send two separate letters or postcards; for instance, don't combine a Letter to the Editor with a change of address notification for your subscription. If your letter goes to the editor's desk, the change of address might not be handled quickly, and if it's delivered to the subscription department, the editor might not see it soon enough to consider it for publication.

To order a subscription, use the address given in the "Subscriptions" paragraph on page 3—sending your payment to the magazine's business office could slow down the processing of your order.

The address for all communications concerning the magazine except for subscriptions is AMAZING Stories, P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

Divinity School



Illustration by Joanne Lorah

Kent Patterson

"I!"

A blast of wind howled through the jungle, ripping down vines, breaking branches to the ground, and flinging swarms of dead leaves and panicky birds fluttering into the night.

"AM!"

Lightning split the sky. For half a heartbeat, every leaf, every shivering fern, glittered like emeralds in the blazing light.

"Korcharlieke, God of Day and Night!"

"Yeah, yeah, King of Kings, Master of the Underworld, Knower of All Knowledge, the Top of the Topmost Tower and all that," said the still, small voice of the All Dimensional Supernal Wonder. "I've seen better weather work done by a Hindi magician, and he was a fraud."

Composed entirely of pure intellect and thus invisible, the All Dim Wonder looked like nothing. But had it been visible, and had it been poured into a bowl in the "Y'awl Come" Beachfront Cafe in Port Orford, Oregon, it would have looked exactly like Mrs. Hyacinth Berrunkey's clam chowder, only suffused with a blinding supernatural light. Without the clams, of course.

Instantly the wind spun into a giant tornado, ripping up leaves, ferns, moss, twigs and even whole tree limbs to form a green funnel winding from the ground

all the way up to the clouds. Gradually the funnel split in two, taking on human shape with wind funnels for legs and a thundercloud for a head. "Look on my face and despair, you cringing children of Earth," roared Korcharlieke. Then, quietly, he said, "Pardon my presumption, your most worshipful presence. But could your Hindi magician do this?"

"Look, Charlie," said the All Dim Wonder. "Lose the special effects. Who you trying to impress? Neo and Lithic, the Neanderthal twins? Stay awake in class! You just haven't grasped the assignment. Old-fashioned general godly hell-raising won't cut it in the contemporary market. Now you've got to find a divine ecological niche. I'm looking for something upscale, urban chic. Even humans progress sometimes. Nobody, but nobody, lives in jungles anymore. You try that speaking out of the whirlwind schtick over any place more civilized than L.A. and you'll get an AWACS radar plane down your throat before you can pass the collection plate. You're out of date."

"If you'd give me some real powers, I'd have these humans shivering on their knees," said the Knower of All Knowledge.

"The bottom line is, I don't give—you buy! You buy power, you pay in emotion. Emotion, Charlie, good old raw, gut-wrenching human emotion. That's what we pure intellect types need. I want to feel, and a bunch of half-naked savages shivering in the jungle won't generate the emotional horsepower I crave."

"For example, look at Beirut. Slam a door at night, and a dozen kids wake up screaming. Give me that kind of emotion, Charlie, and you'll get power, and you'll get offerings, and you'll get worship!"

"So I don't graduate, I don't get the job, and now you're going to ship me off to some dimension where the highest life form is silicon turtles or something?"

"I've got your application on file. Of course it's a tissue of arrogant lies, but then I like that in a deity. Tell you what, Chuck. Very next opening for a tribal totem for mastodon hunters, you're in. How's that for fair?"

"Oh, worshipful generosity, my heart is like a leaping fawn on a summer's morn in Babylon, my gratitude's . . ."

"Can it, Charlie. You're dismissed. Don't call us, we'll be in touch."

Nice boy, but stooooopid! the Wonder thought. *Right. I'll call the second I find some mastodon hunters. Not to mention some mastodons for them to hunt. Oh, well.* Poor Charlie had a lot to learn about becoming omniscient.

The Wonder hated talking to itself, but that was the only way it could get intelligent conversation. Lately it had begun to think that if a Supernal Wonder were capable of making a mistake, that last stage of its own evolution had been a lulu. Not that there'd ever been much choice. By the laws of physics, all physical objects break down. Even stars eventually cool and die. So do Wonders. The only way to evade the laws of physics is by getting out of their jurisdiction.

Living forever as pure intellect had seemed like a marvelous idea at the time, but there were tradeoffs. Dropping all the weaknesses of a physical body worked great, immortality-wise. But, entertainment-wise, having

no body parts or passion was a crashing bore. Especially no passion, a loss which had come as a surprise. The Wonder hadn't figured that, as its body gradually reverted to primordial hydrogen and then to nothing at all, its emotions would fade like the dye on a cheap tee shirt.

The Wonder had pondered the problem a million times. It made a crazy sort of sense. How can you be sure you are feeling an emotion if you have nothing to feel the emotion with? With a body, when you get angry, you seethe, you coil your tendrils, flash lasers from the eyes. No question you're furious; you feel it in every fiber of your being. Lust? You contract in some places, expand in others, exude juices, flush red. Without that physical feeling, anger, lust, love, and hate all felt like a slight headache. Except with no head, and that didn't even make sense. Without a body, getting emotional was like eating tofu. Intellectually, you knew you were eating. But you didn't feel like you were eating.

How long has it been since I've been really ticked, and really felt it? the Wonder thought. It's hard when you have to steal emotions from humans. It takes thousands of angry humans for a real rage—and millions for a first-class tantrum. Getting really pissed was fun, and lust, greed, and envy weren't bad, either.

Sometimes the Wonder even envied humans. Intellectually, they were barely distinguishable from the stones they sharpened to bash each other's wet little brains out. But they radiated emotion. A human was nothing but a giant hormone with legs and sex organs.

Of course, to get emotional, they had to be stirred up a bit. The Wonder had tried to freak out the humans. But without a body, the best physical manifestation it could manage was only a faint nightmare. Humans invariably blamed it on indigestion. Gods could sense a Wonder; they trembled with abject terror. Humans saw nothing. No one gets stirred up much over something he or she can't see, hear, or barely even dream about. Only the intermediate gods could really work on the crude human senses, and lately the gods got wimpier each millennium. What ever happened to good old Baal, and Moloch the baby burner? Now those were gods to be reckoned with!

"Next applicant!"

"Oooooowooooooo . . ." The being had the head of a goat, the body of a man, and the scales of a fish on a crocodile's tail, and smelled like a wet day in a goatyard.

"Enough already!" bellowed the Supernal Wonder. "Voodoo is flat out. No way. We're going for an upscale market here!"

"How about gris-gris?"

"Out of the question! Look, Animal Crackers, the only ones into that blood sacrifice stuff are punks and coke freaks. We've got both markets covered already, and to spare. We want yuppies now! Sacrifice is too messy. Ever try gutting a goat in a condo? How's your average yuppie going to check the insides of a black cockerel, anyway? Gonna get them at Safeway's Gourmet Animal Entrails Barre? Yuppies think chickens grow in little brown cubes in plastic shrinkwrapped cases with 'Microwaveable' and 'All Natural Ingredients' printed on the outside. You flunk!"

"But—"

"Gof And take that stinking goat head with you!" When would these jerks learn the good old days were gone?

"Next!"

There was a flash of light. Slowly a flaming bush materialized. Though the flames crackled and roared, the bush never blackened or burned in the slightest.

"Oh, it's you," the Wonder said. "You must have heard the bit about old gods. Buzz off. I'm only taking new or recycled supreme beings. And while I'm thinking about it, you really ought to modernize that trademark of yours. Visually speaking, it's dated."

"But your Wonderness, the burning bush trademark is known around the world. Instant logo recognition. Shocks those shepherds right out of their sandals. And only costs about five hundred watts."

"Well, the burning bush was a great gag once. But shocking shepherds isn't the growth market now. I'm looking for the young style, a fresh approach, and that's not you. What have you done for me lately?"

"Belfast?"

"Belfast's good, yes. But nothing new in years."

"TV evangelists?"

"You mean the ones that aren't in jail? You're losing your touch. For instance, what's this I hear about your churches offering aerobics? Even Southern Baptists, yet! Next thing you know you'll be up to your toplest towers in Unitarians!"

"Well, it does wonders for attendance."

"Running Disney movies would do wonders for attendance! But let's face it. Emotion-wise, a bunch of chubbies jiggling around in leotards just isn't the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, now, is it? You're losing it!"

"But . . ."

"Next applicant!"

"I am The Goddess."

The Goddess was extremely tall, no trick in itself since gods can be any physical shape they choose. But, the Wonder noted, not only was she tall, she *looked* tall, meaning she had at least an elementary sense of style. Dark hair flowing down her back emphasized her height. She wore a simple white woven lightning gown which flashed and flickered as she spoke. Even the lightning flashes were carefully routed to show off her height.

"Maybe you've been looking for new wine in old bottles," she said, her gown flickering. "Remember, the best man for the job could be a woman."

"Your approach at least seems to be in the right century," said the Wonder. "Nice dress, too, though the power bill's going to cost you an arm and a leg. But, really, sister, The Goddess? What about Aphrodite and all those Hindu ladies with six arms? If they hear you, they'll be all over your face. Besides, PR-wise, 'The Goddess' is a bit generic, isn't it? And . . . Say, don't I recognize you from someplace?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't fool Mother Omniscience, sister. Yeah. Few years ago, three or four thousand. Greek or Latin, or one of those Mediterranean folks. You worked the old love potion, fertility, and easy childbirth racket."

Somehow, The Goddess grew even taller. "I was a healer! Hippocrates took lessons from me."

"Sure. But who's taking lessons now? Technological obsolescence comes to us all, sister."

"Give me the power to heal and I'll show you marvels!"

"As for marvels, I'm the biggest marvel there is. And you don't need powers to work healing. Humans pray and get better, they're pathetically grateful. They don't get better—well, then there's no complaint. Your competition is talking war, death, destruction, the fall of nations. Can you top that?"

"What about the battle of the bedrooms? The war of the sexes?"

"Sounds low voltage to me. Not too many dead in the battle of the sexes, sister. Now, if you could manage to come up with a nice little crusade . . ."

"But with no dead, you don't have to keep getting new humans! You just recycle the same ones! And just because there's no dead, don't think there's no casualties. Emotional casualties," she stressed. "Fear. Humiliation. Revenge. Even love."

"Sounds dull."

"And lust. Frustrated, twisted lust."

"Human relationships bore me. Too murky. Give me good old honest rage and a decent massacre any time."

"You think so? The Goddess leaned down from her great height. "Let me show you some real emotion."

It started somewhere in a tiny corner at the back of the Wonder's mind, then grew and spread like some vast dust cloud billowing through the universe and blotting the light from a billion billion galaxies. All the dull, smoky, aching of millions of broken marriages, and the sharper aching of millions that should have been broken, but because of law, or cowardice, or custom, ground on and on until the couples sat staring at each other . . . too old, too tired even to resent their lost lives. All the sharp little needles from missed dates; endless hours waiting for phones that never rang; invitations that never came; long, throbbing waves of the pain of lying in bed hearing the clock ticking, wondering where the loved one was and knowing the answer far too well; and, running through like a dull theme in a badly written symphony, jealousy, disappointment, and humiliation.

The Supernal Wonder had never felt so bad since becoming immortal. It felt marvelous.

"You do have a point." The Wonder pondered. At long last, it spoke again.

"Tell you what. You'll get the standard ninety-year trial period. You get the power to speak into men's hearts—er, persons' hearts—and up to two miracles per calendar year. The miracles not to exceed one weeping oil painting or its equivalent in divine energy. Things work out in ninety years, maybe you get speaking in tongues. Only see if you can't come up with a name with a bit more class."

"Your slightest wish is my command, your Supernalness," said The Goddess, trying very hard to hide her smirk of triumph from its omniscient gaze.

"Ha, sister. My slightest wish is everyone's command, and don't you forget it." ♦

Looking Forward:

The Road to Ehvenor

by Joel Rosenberg

Coming in December 1991 from Roc Books

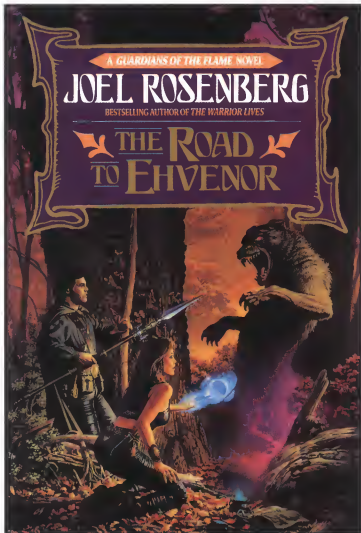
Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Sometimes a series seems to get stronger as it gets longer, and that's certainly the case with Joel Rosenberg's *Guardians of the Flame* novels. *The Road to Ehvenor* is the sixth installment of the series, which shows no signs of decreasing in popularity.

In this fast-moving adventure the heroes, transported from our time, have to travel across a continent to close a rift that is flooding their world with incredible beasts. In between encounters with these beasts, they also have to deal with betrayals, marital problems, magic addiction, and getting their next meal. Everything combines to make this book, just like the first five in this must-read series, feel both realistic and fantastic at the same time.

In this excerpt, the party of adventurers has hired a not too honest sea captain to hurry them away from a hostile shore. They have escaped the villain's castle by bluffing that they had poisoned him, which seemed to be a good idea at the time. The action begins at the start of Chapter Eighteen, titled "In Which I Make a Trade and We Seek to Bid Farewell to the Friendly Natives of Brae."

Logistics, formal or in-, has never been something that I've found terribly interesting. It's always been somebody else's department. Riccetti, now . . . hell, Lou would have worked out the



Cover art by Keith Parkinson

problems just as a matter of practice. Logistics was why we put Little Pittsburgh in Holtun, rather than Home—Home is out of the way, and too near eleven lands for the comfort of many, myself included.

That's Lou. Me, I had been vaguely wondering how they had managed to load the ship, but I hadn't really thought much about it until the launch pulled around the far side of it, revealing the floating dock.

Well, actually, it was more of a small, thin barge, stabilized at either end by floating barrels lashed to the waterline, which presumably didn't let it dip or rock much that way. A wooden frame hung over the railing of the boat, basically locking the barge into place at the waterline. Clearly, the goods had been placed on it back on dockside, and then the whole thing poled out to the *Delenia*, the frame tied into place. That way, the barge could be emptied into the cargo net and the net lifted up by the winch with some reasonable amount of security for both crew and cargo.

Above, two crewmen were finishing securing the cargo crane, the cargo netting already having been neatly folded over the rail and lashed into place. They were late with that. You can't actually use the crane unless you've got the sail booms either stowed or, more commonly, lashed to the other side of the ship—they both swing through the same space, as the long-arm crane's boom has to be long enough to swing through a huge arc to provide the mechanical advantage that will allow one or two seamen to move a ton of cargo from dock to deck.

During my time at sea, working my way from port to port, I always used to like running the winch and crane. It's hard work, which I grant is atypical for me, but there's something special about being able to handle such massive forces, even by indirection.

Then again, maybe not.

I thought for a moment that it was all going to break loose as Tennetty leaped lightly from the launch to the floating dock, then helped me up, the flask still clasped carefully in my hand, as though everything depended on it.

Which it did.

Dacran and his soldiers followed us onto the floating barge, two of them carefully lowering Bast and Kendra to the ground. Above, the captain, his hands on the rail, leaned over.

I disliked him at first sight—from the neatly trimmed beard, framing the lips that were parted in an exhibition of straight, white teeth, down to the v-shaped torso of an acrobat or bodybuilder, all the way to treetrunk legs. All nicely bronzed, rather than browned.

Pretty men bother me.

"Greetings," he said, his voice deceptively calm. Or maybe not. Maybe he was just an idiot who hadn't figured out how easily, how quickly everything could go to hell. "I am Erol Lyneian, captain of the *Delenia*."

I nodded. "Walter Slovotsky. Captain of my own soul."

"Oh, shit," Tennetty muttered. "I thought you were going to react like this."

"What?"

"You don't like competition, Slovotsky," she said. "Pay attention."

"I see," he went on, "that we have a problem. Why don't all of you come up and discuss it?"

It was just as well that Tennetty had cautioned me—it had been my intention to make the final exchange aboard ship, but something in his voice made me want to change my mind.

It was still the right move. "Very well," I said.

Ahira was waiting for me at the top of the ladder. "I think," he said, "that we may have a problem." His voice had taken on that level, overly calm tone he only used when things were just about to break. "*Delenia* and Erol Lyneian have been trading here for too long, and they're on good terms."

"How good?"

"Good enough that Erol Lyneian isn't even scared."

That was bad. Part of the plan involved the captain being sufficiently frightened of the local lord that he would want out of there, and quickly, not trusting Lord Dacran to believe that his involvement with us was innocent. It's sort of like Big Mike's routine with the stoolie, except Lord Dacran played more for keeps than any bunch of New Jersey street hooks.

Andy's eyes were glazed over, almost completely. If I'd had the genes for it, I suspect I'd have seen nascent spells hovering over her. But if everything went off, she would be like a flamethrower operator in combat—everybody's favorite target. She might have time to get a muttered, unrememberable syllable out, but she might not.

What we needed was something that would be worth more to Erol Lyneian than the ability to trade in Brae. A lot more. He only had a crew of five—it doesn't take many to run a well-designed ketch, and the more labor you have, the narrower the profits—and things didn't look like an even match, even with them on our side.

On the other hand, if everything hit the fan, he would know there was no guarantee he would make it out alive.

I smiled at him, as though to say, *You can count on being the first to go*, and he smiled back and made a gracious gesture, as though to say, *After you, my dear Alphonse*.

Okay, I know: there were twelve of them against five of us, and I've faced worse odds than twelve to five.

On the other hand, Dacran's soldiers looked like they knew what they were doing, both singly—which was bad enough—and worse, collectively. As though to underline that, three of Dacran's bruisers leaned their heads together and started divvying up targets.

Bad, bad, bad. We could probably take on the six, but it would be close, and if the seamen came in on the other side . . .

I did a quick sum of the party's possessions, including coin, gem, potions, and everything, and decided that wasn't going to do it, even if we threw in my charm. A sea trader has to be something of an adventurous type, but his ship comes first, unless—and maybe not even if—you've got enough to buy him another ship.

Lord Daeran had decided that wasn't going to do it, either. He held out his hand. "The antidote, please," he said, smiling, his men gathered around him in a semicircle. "Then we'll all leave," he said, lying, thinking that I would have to decide to believe him.

That's how a Mexican standoff ends. With somebody making a fatal error.

"What would you trade for passage on your ship, Erol Lyncian?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, idly, "you've already paid for your passage." He didn't expect me to believe him, and I didn't.

Well, we'd been saving this for years. It was even a secret that anybody but the Engineer knew how to make it, although all of us Other Siders did.

I will tell you how to make gunpowder," I said. "Not the magical slaver imitation. Real gunpowder, black powder. It's very cheap to make. I'd tell you right now, except that they would know how, too."

Ahira's jaw dropped, and Jason's eyes grew wide. I wasn't looking at Andy and Tennetty, but I don't imagine I would have seen them beaming approval.

Look. It wasn't the best idea in the world. Maybe it wasn't even a good idea. The best I can say for it is that I'd just given Lord Daeran and Erol Lyncian a huge conflict of interest. One of them as the source of real gunpowder would mean an immense shower of wealth; two would mean just another competitive business. As the sole non-Home possessor of the secret, Erol Lyncian would be a happy ship owner sailing from port to port, selling cheaply made gunpowder at high prices; if it could be bought competitively, it was just another commodity.

If I'd had a day or more to think it over, I can't imagine anything else I could have said that would have made Erol Lyncian want to side with us, rather than with Lord Daeran. I've thought about it since, and I still can't come up with an alternative.

There was only one trouble in this admittedly brilliant piece of improvisation: I could see by the look in Erol Lyncian's eye that he didn't believe me.

I only realized that Lord Daeran did believe me when he lunged for me, wrestling the flask from my hand as he shoved me up against the rail.

In retrospect, of course, it only stands to reason. I'd spent some time persuading Lord Daeran of my sincerity, and it had worked—he went for the flask of supposed antidote, after all. He was disposed to believe me; I could have sold him the Brooklyn Bridge, even though he wouldn't have had the slightest idea what a Brooklyn is. Erol Lyncian, on the other hand, had just met me, and had yet to discover what a charming and reliable fellow I am.

Things went to hell quickly.

One reason that wizards need good bodyguards is that in a fight, a wizard is everybody's first target; having Andy free and operating would have ended things in our favor quickly.

Two soldiers jumped at her; out of the corner of my eye I saw Andy collapse from a blow to the head, and

Tennetty hack down at the soldier who then tried to pin her against the deck, but I was busy with my own fight.

This would, in the old days, have been a great time for Karl to be there.

Once, when a trap we set for slavers went suddenly sour, he ended up inside a circle of swordsmen—and good ones, too—armed with nothing more than an improvised quarterstaff. In about eight seconds, it was all over—he had hit them hard, and fast, and they were down.

But Karl was dead and gone, and all we had was me.

I did the best I could—I flung a throwing knife into Lord Daeran's belly, and lashed out with my foot at the nearest of the soldiers, sending him crashing into one of his fellows.

That gave me enough time to get my sword free.

I batted a knife out of the way and slipped my blade in between another's ribs. His bubbling scream cut off as he twisted spasmodically away, my blade jamming in his ribs, taking my sword with him. Ten years before, even five years before, I would have moved fast enough to extricate the blade, to twist it loose, before it was caught, but I was getting old and slow.

We would have had no chance at all if it hadn't been for Jason's revolver and for Ahira. The dwarf somehow got hold of a huge boarding pole, and flailed it around like a quarterstaff, hitting one of Lord Daeran's men so hard that he actually broke through the railing and slammed down hard on the floating dock below.

Jason's revolver spat flame and smoke at one of the soldiers, echoed by a gout of blood and gore from his thigh. Screaming, the soldier fell heavily, across Bast.

Bast's arms moved spasmodically, clumsy hands flailing away at the soldier's face. He was doing the best he could, but he wasn't going to be any help.

I ducked under a butt-stroke from a spear and lunged for the owner of it, drawing one of my Therranji garrotes as I did. I faked at him with my left hand, then neatly looped the garrote over his head with my right, drawing it tight with a jerk that should have taken his head half off.

Face already purpling, he staggered away, fingers clawing uselessly at his throat. It would take a bolt cutter to save him now, and I wasn't about to go digging in my kit for ours.

But there were so many of them; even without Erol Lyncian and his sailors taking part, there were just too many of them for us to take at such close range. I should have thought it out better. I should have insisted that Jason stand back, out of range, before everything hit the fan, but that sort of thing had always been Karl's department, and Karl was dead.

One soldier reached Jason, pulling his revolver down, his body shuddering at the shot that ripped through his belly and out his back, but before Jason could free the weapon two others were already on him.

Tennetty had just fired one of her flintlocks, although I didn't see what, if anything, she hit. Moving even faster than I'd have thought she could, she was on the back of one of the soldiers wrestling with Jason, her

shiny bowie rising then falling, then rising and falling again, now redly wet.

Jason managed to free himself and fire off two more quick shots, but his revolver clicked empty.

The revolver,

It fired cartridges, filled with the smokeless powder that Lou Riccetti and his top assistants had spent years perfecting; for now, it was one of two, one of only two repeating pistols, the most advanced weaponry in the world.

Jason was Karl Cullinane's son, and Karl Cullinane would have done his damndest to make sure that a weapon that advanced didn't fall into foreign hands. Jason Cullinane tossed the pistol over his right shoulder, over the railing. A priceless piece of blued steel tumbled end-over-end through the air, arcing outward.

I think that was when I heard Tennyetny scream, as a sword pinned her by the shoulder to a mast, her knife falling from her useless fingers. I know that was when Jason went down under a rush of bodies. It was too late for him to get his sword free—

Something caught me upside the head, shaking the whole universe for a moment. I staggered, tried to recover as I drew my belt knife and stabbed backwards, rewarded by a scream.

"Walter, we—" I didn't get to hear what Ahira was trying to say. The largest of the soldiers hit him with a flying tackle, neatly knocking the dwarf, his arms spread wide in helplessness, backwards through the hole in the

railing, like a cue ball smacking into the eight, and the eight into the pocket.

Except that the pocket here was deep water.

Very deep water.

"No."

No, it was going to be okay. Ahira was tough. When he hit the floating dock, his superior musculature and thicker bones would protect him. But he had been hit hard, and at a sharp angle, and it arced him out past—

I can still hear his scream of terror, a high wailing cry. I can still see him falling backwards, out of control, his fingers reaching for the floating dock, missing it by inches. I can still see the splash he made, and see his wide eyes, and the panic written on his face as the water closed over it.

Dwarves don't float.

Dwarves can't swim.

Dwarves sink like a stone.

"No," I shouted. Asshole. You'd think that a man would learn, well before he's my age, that wanting something not to be so has never, ever changed it, that it doesn't matter what you want, what you desire, what you need, but what you do.

Reflexively, foolishly, idiotically, uselessly, I reached out a hand, but it was useless. The water was eight, ten feet below the rail, and Ahira had already vanished from sight.

Something hit me alongside my right ear, I think. ♦



Looking Forward:

Hour of the Scorpion

by Matthew J. Costello

Coming in December 1991 from Roc Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

This book, volume 2 in the *Time Warrior* series, chronicles the further adventures of Jim Tiber, a graduate student who's getting an education unlike anyone else has ever received.

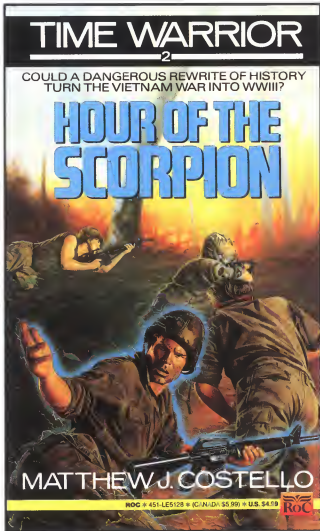
A few years in our future, Jim persuaded his roommate to let him use a highly experimental time machine. He wanted to get a look at the early Beatles—a few minutes that would ensure the success of his doctoral thesis. Instead, something went wrong, and Jim found himself uncontrollably caught up in the time stream.

He has been transported to Vietnam, just before the Tet Offensive is about to begin, into a history that is remarkably different from our version of what happened. Enemies of the United States have also traveled in time back to this point, and are plotting to change the outcome of the conflict so that the U.S. suffers a resounding defeat—hoping that this turn of events will make America determined to crush North Vietnam, which in turn will lead to a confrontation with the major Communist powers that will trigger World War III.

In the guise of an ordinary soldier, Jim has to thwart the plot, find his girlfriend who has become lost trying to bring him back to his own time, and survive the constant danger from enemy soldiers, spies, and the jungle itself.

Howell pushed close to the point, holding the map tight in one hand while Henderson struggled to make his way through the heavy brush. We're moving off the slope, Howell knew, moving damn close to the trail.

But this was all new growth they were humping through. Something must have burned this part of the jungle, burning off the teak and mahogany, and leaving it wide open for the thick vines and bushes that were a real bitch to cut through.



Cover art by: Cliff Miller

"How you doing, Henderson?" he whispered to the scrawny soldier. Henderson's arms looked like bean poles, but he was doing a damn good job of whacking through the brush.

"Fine, Sarge. I'll be glad"—Henderson fought his way through more vines—"when we're through—this shit."

"Yeah, I hear you. It's one thing to go to the woods, but this is like another planet. Just keep it up . . ." Howell looked back to see the rest of the line. He saw four soldiers just behind him and then, looking lost, Lieutenant McShane . . . stumbling along, left and right.

Something's wrong, he thought. Something's *real* wrong with the lieutenant. At first Howell thought McShane was just hung over, or maybe stoned. It's an occupational hazard in Nam. And in a few hours, he'll snap out of it and take charge again. McShane was one real smart lieutenant—not gung ho. He was too smart for that, too smart to waste his men doing stupid jungle prowls. But if they caught some smoke, he was the best, real cool, getting everybody calmed down and in the best position.

And he didn't call up heavy fire from home unless things were real bad. They always drop their loads short, he laughed. Better off without the shit . . .

So, Howell thought, what the hell is wrong with him? He seems like a damned different person.

It made Howell real nervous.

Henderson whispered back to him. "Better hold them up, Sarge. I got a fuckin' briar patch to cut through here." Howell turned back to the line and pumped his arm.

He saw the men halt—all except for McShane, who stumbled ahead a few more feet before noticing that his men had stopped moving.

Damn! What the hell is it with him?

He heard Henderson's blade snapping through the vines, the gentle whistle of the blade in the air, the heavy *thwack* as it cut into the tangle of vines.

"Almost there, Sarge. Just—a few—"

Then Howell thought he heard something, above the noise of Henderson cutting.

"Wait a minute, man!" he whispered. Henderson didn't hear him, and he made another stroke. "I said, wait a damn minute!" Howell repeated louder.

Henderson froze, breathing hard.

And Howell turned left and right. There were noises. Shit, there were always noises in the jungle. Small animals skittering around on the ground. A rat snake snatching a jungle rat and squeezing it until it split in two. Always damn noises . . .

But this—Hell, they sounded like *voices*.

I thought this was supposed to be a wild goose chase, Howell thought. A quiet night with no action.

Howell slid his gun off his shoulder.

Damn, he thought. We're closer to the supply trail than I thought.

Much closer, and Charlie might have some action waiting down there for us.

Howell flicked the safety off his M-16.

He turned and saw McShane, back in the gloom, watching him.

Come on, man, I need you tonight. Don't freak on me. We can't afford not to have you on board.

One of the men down at the end of the line coughed.

Howell raised his arm and pumped. Three times.

Charlie ahead. The silent message was passed on down the line.

And then—he turned to Henderson and nodded.

He whispered to him. "Nice and gentle now, Henderson. Just as sweet and quiet as you can do it."

Henderson's sweaty face was scrunched up, not understanding Howell's concern.

But now he attacked the viney barrier more delicately, chipping a smaller pathway leading down to the jungle trail that lay ahead of him.

And Howell set his rifle for automatic firing.

Because, he thought, it looks like we're going to rock n' roll tonight after all. . . .

Lindstrom stood there, looking at Ali. Just staring at her face. So very pretty, he thought.

She's like a sleeping beauty. So peaceful, her eyes gently closed as if she was dreaming about young princes and wonderful castles.

But there are no princes anymore, and all the castles have been turned into condos.

"Shall I take her?" Dr. Beck asked.

Lindstrom nodded. "Yes. And check on how Dr. McManus is doing." Lindstrom rubbed his eyes and let out an uncontrollable bellow of a yawn.

"You should get some rest, too," Dr. Beck said. "It will do us no good if you're flat on your back, too!"

"There's nothing wrong with me that a few sips of Scotland's finest wouldn't cure."

Dr. Beck shook her head disapprovingly and started wheeling Ali's chair back to the dark waiting area, the shadowy room that Lindstrom thought had the smell and feel of a morgue about it. Except the bodies were all alive.

But not really.

"Scotland's finest . . ." Beck muttered, walking away. "I'd like to see what your liver has to say about that."

Lindstrom laughed and then said, to himself, "My liver hasn't issued any complaints . . . so far."

He turned and looked at his table, now overflowing with notes taken from the computer printout. Unlike the last adventure of the Iron Men, the changes—so far—were small, almost uneventful.

But he knew the danger of what they were playing with.

Every century has its fulcrum points, Lindstrom knew. Points that determine the course of history for decades, maybe even centuries to come. Most people thought that Hitler's rise, and the Armageddon of World War II, was one of those points. And it was, but not in the way most people think. That war and Hitler's mad racist schemes only disrupted the natural course of events. The United States that emerged in the Twenty-First century was merely postponed by that war—not stopped. Of course, if the Iron Men had been successful with their attempt to fortify the Soviet hardliners with stolen

German loot from World War II, well, then, anything could have happened.

But we stopped them there, he smiled.

No. A real turning point, a real fulcrum of history, was the Tet Offensive. Its effects lasted well beyond the Vietnam War. American society, its entire global outlook, was forever changed. America wasn't simply chastened by the experience. Nearly two hundred years of bump-tious, jingoistic naivete was dispelled. And then began the difficult job of building an understanding of the US's real place in the world.

But—and here's the thought that chilled Lindstrom—what if that naivete hadn't been dispelled?

What impact would *that* have on history?

Lindstrom could well guess. The Iron Men were clever this time, selecting Tet. And, as far as Lindstrom knew, they had made only one mistake.

They didn't plan on me.

Sure, Ali's back there, and—if all went well, Jim too. But Lindstrom knew that before this war was over he'd have to go back, to guide them through the necessary machinations to save the whole damn business.

Yes, they didn't plan on *me*, he thought. And is there anyone in this country who knows more about that whole misbegotten adventure . . . the Vietnam War?

Doubtful. Very doubtful.

No. And he remembered why.

He remembered the day as a small boy in Iola, Wisconsin. It was fall. Halloween was just the next week. His mother called him in from outside, away from the great golden pile of leaves he was jumping into with his friends, burrowing under, smelling the fall, savoring it while winter was years away.

He ran into the small house that always seemed too warm when he ran inside. His mother stood in the hall. She knelt down close to him. She held a piece of paper in her hand. Her eyes glistened in the half light of the hall. Her cheeks looked—he took a step closer—wet.

It took forever for her to tell him. He stood there, still smelling the leaves, the cold wind outside. Stood there listening to words that came out in small, controlled gasps. Until, slowly, oh so slowly and painfully, a glint of meaning emerged.

And he knew what mom was saying. He knew that his dad—this giant, shining figure who was only around for a few weeks, and then gone again—wasn't ever going to come home, not ever again.

He heard his mom say that he died for his country.

And when he heard that word . . . died . . . he thought of other dead things. A raccoon he saw on a road. A baby robin that fell out of its nest. A pile of fish in the bottom of his grandfather's small boat.

He knew what "dead" was.

Lindstrom took a breath, the scene playing through his mind for the thousandth time.

And that moment, back in Iola, is when Lindstrom knew that this war would be the one thing he'd learn everything about. Absolutely everything. . . .

The leaders, the battles, the politics, the mistakes, the madness, the weapons.

Everything.

It would be his way of not letting go of his father.

Lindstrom rubbed at his eyes again.

They didn't plan on me, he thought.

Now isn't that too damn bad?

"Give me a fuckin' break," someone hissed behind Jim.

Jim saw Howell look back, his black face nearly lost in the foliage. And Jim knew the sergeant wanted him to come to the front.

"Excuse me," Jim said awkwardly, squeezing past the soldier in front of him who said, "Yes, sir," acting confused by Jim's politeness.

Jim weaved his way to the front of the line.

It was even darker than before, with no hint of the moon in the east. He knew that there'd be a tiny sliver of a crescent somewhere near dawn. But there'd be no light before then.

He came and crouched beside Howell and the soldier who had been walking point.

"What is it?" Jim said.

"We've got some voices down there," Howell pointed. "I think Charlie's doing something, Lieutenant."

Right. Jim nodded. Now what the hell do we do?

He looked at Howell. "Any ideas?"

"Well, it sounds like they're coming this way, movin' south, just like the reports said. Now, if we can just wait here, stay low, and then move behind them . . ."

Jim listened. He knew that he should probably agree to Howell's plan, but something about it bothered him.

But how could I know what to do? he wondered.

Then he saw the problem through. And he knew it was coming from McShane's training.

"No," Jim said, shaking his head. "If we fall in behind them, they could turn—and if there's another line of troops behind them, we'll be caught right in the middle."

Henderson had his face down close, listening. Howell shot him a look. "Do you mind, Private?"

"Oh, sorry, Sarge."

Okay, Jim thought. If Howell's plan is no good, then what do we do?

And—amazingly enough—he saw another possibility.

"Why can't we run alongside the trail, get parallel to them and wait"—Jim looked to the south—"yeah, wait along the trail along the hill that we just climbed. We'll wait until they're just there, just right beside us, then we'll lay down some heavy fire, B-40s and—"

B-40s? What the hell am I talking about? Jim wondered. But the words, the plan, just came rumbling out.

"That's good, sir, But damn, I wish we could set some claymores. But there's probably no time."

"That's right."

Jim looked at Howell. Was it Jim's imagination, or did he see great relief etched into his sergeant's face? God knows what he's been thinking is wrong with me.

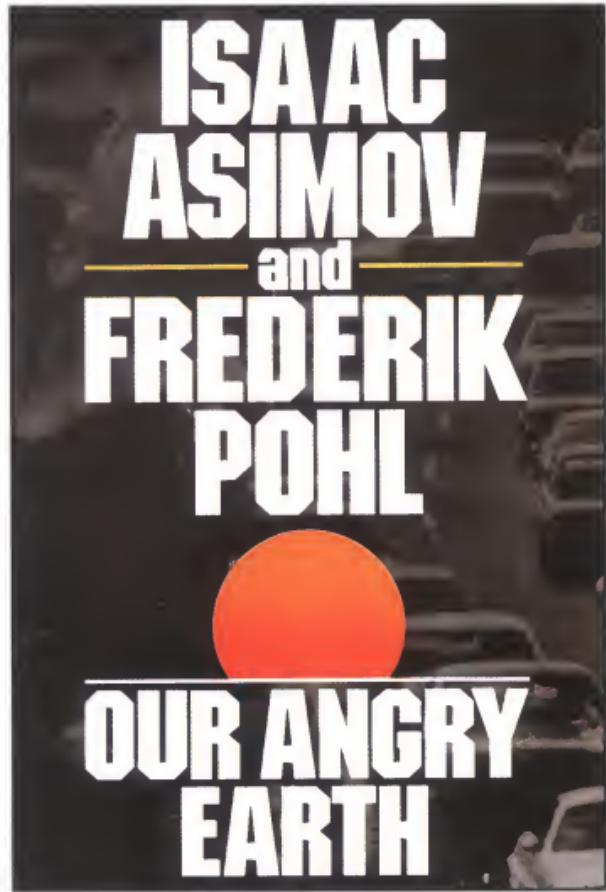
Jim stood up. Can't get cocky. I get a little pressure, a bit of adrenaline, and some much-needed information surfaces from old McShane's dormant consciousness.

Great, terrific, but when this is all over I'll probably go back to being incompetent. ♦

The Pollution of Space

An excerpt from **Our Angry Earth**,
coming in November 1991 from Tor Books

by **Isaac Asimov and Frederik Pohl**



**ISAAC
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and
**FREDERIK
POHL**

**OUR ANGRY
EARTH**

Jackie L. Smith by Joe L. Smith

Introduction

There is no more appropriate way to describe the content and the purpose of this book than to use the words of the authors themselves, as quoted on the back of the book jacket:

"This book is not an opinion piece. It is a scientific study of the situation that threatens us all—and it says what we can do to mitigate the situation."

—Isaac Asimov

"As I write this my grandchildren range from the very small to the middle teens, and when they grow up and have children of their own I would like very much for them, too, to have green trees around them, and plenty to eat, and for them to be able to walk in the sun without fear of a nasty death, and to know that the world will survive."

—Frederik Pohl

It's hard to believe that empty space itself can be polluted by human efforts. It's true, though. We have trashed the orbits our spacecraft travel through. So much so that, before every launch of a space shuttle, NASA's high-speed computers run for a full twenty-four hours on just one element of the flight: to choose a safe orbit, so that the shuttle won't destroy itself by colliding with some other manmade orbiting body.

Space is in fact fairly empty. But it is no longer empty *enough*. As of the last announced count (in early 1989) there were 7,119 manmade objects in Low Earth Orbit big enough to be tracked by surface radar. A handful of them are

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working satellites—communications, intelligence, weather. Some are satellites which have run out of energy or lost communication and are now “dead”—but remain in orbit because the laws of orbiting ballistics don’t give them any other place to go. Some are pieces of scrap metal from broken-up satellites, launch vehicles or fuel tanks. A few are simply objects that the astronauts or cosmonauts have dropped—a wrench, a screwdriver, a Hasselblad camera. They range from the size of a baseball to the size of a school bus, and they are moving at high speeds—around four miles a second, fast enough so that even the smallest of them could seriously damage any object they happened to hit, even the shuttle.

Taken all together, what these abandoned spaceborne objects amount to is a sort of orbital minefield, left there by the spacefaring nations of the Earth. They are space junk, and their number is still increasing. Two German scientists—Peter Eichler and Dietrich Rex of the Technical University of Braunschweig—have estimated that the chance of a “catastrophic” collision in space is now about 3.7% per year, and predict that if the present rate of increase of space debris continues, by the middle of the next century any such collision could set off a chain reaction.

Is there any way of cleaning up this garbage belt? There have been plenty of proposals for doing so, ranging from passive “vacuum cleaners” (a windmill-like satellite with huge plastic vanes, or a huge, miles-across ball of sponge plastic, either of which would simply soak up all the smaller objects in their path) to active robot spacecraft, remote-controlled, that would be flown ahead of the shuttle through its orbit, as tanks shelter advancing infantry. None of these is likely to be put into practice for several reasons. First, they are all terribly expensive. Second, none of them would work as well as simply keeping the trash out of orbit in the first place. And third, most of them might actually produce more small particles after a collision.

For those large objects are only

the beginning. In addition to the big ones, there is an uncounted multitude of tinier objects in those same orbits, too small for the radar search at Goddard Flight Center to detect. There are somewhere around forty or fifty thousand of these smaller things from the size of a marble up—as well as a much larger number of tinier objects still. Perhaps there are a million of the least bits of trash: flecks of paint from old fuel tanks, fragments of metal tinier than a fingernail, odds and ends of litter of all kinds.

Even the tiniest bits of cosmic shrapnel are dangerous to anything they collide with. Small as they are, they are *fast*. Because of their velocities the kinetic energy—which is to say, the destructive power—of even the least of them in a head-on collision can do as much damage as a cannonball at sixty miles an hour. It is certainly enough, for instance, to kill an astronaut if he were unlucky enough to have his suit punctured by one.

Here, too, there is no end to the technological fixes that have been proposed. If the space station is ever built, for example, NASA has already made plans to surround it with a double wall of thin sheet aluminum—hopefully to absorb the kinetic energy before it hits anything important. Two engineers, Cyrus Butner and Charles Garrell, have patented a “Method and Apparatus for Orbit Debris Mitigation” which consists of a honeycomb of cone-shaped buffers lined with some energy-absorbing substance, and there are dozens of other ideas which have been put forth more tentatively.

Whether any of them would work is unclear. That they would add mass to every launch, and thus reduce the amount of payload that could be carried, is unquestionable. In any case, even if they worked there are many cases where they couldn’t be used. The mirror of a space telescope or the receptors of many kinds of instruments simply could not function with any sort of shield between them and the things they are launched to observe.

The danger from these tiniest bits is no longer theoretical, either. It has

already been proven to be enough to destroy a working satellite.

Consider the case of the Solar Maximum satellite.

Solar Max was launched in 1980 as a scientific instrument, charged with measuring the radiation from the sun. That is important research, because its purpose was to study the indispensable ultimate source of energy possessed by the human race.

Solar Max did its job very well for a while, but the good time lasted only for a few months. On September 23, 1980, the data from Solar Max stopped coming, and its ground controllers could not tell why.

For three and a half years after that date, Solar Max circled the Earth in silence.

Then, in April 1984, the shuttle astronauts repaired it. They did it while both they and it were in orbit, and that was a truly remarkable feat. First they had to find the dead satellite and maneuver the shuttle to approach it as closely as possible.

Then one of them had to put on a spacesuit, launch himself out into space to Solar Max, open the satellite up, remove the damaged parts and replace them with new ones. All of this had to be done while floating in empty space, more than a hundred miles above the Earth. It was a complex and exhausting job, and the astronauts did it beautifully.

They were successful. At once Solar Max came alive again. It took up its interrupted task; its reports began to come back down to the ground stations, and they kept on doing so until at last, five years later, Solar Max came to the end of its working life. It wasn’t any kind of instrument failure that did it in. It was atmospheric friction. In the normal course of the solar cycle the Sun’s heat had warmed the Earth’s atmosphere to the point where thermal expansion brought air molecules up to Solar Max’s level. The drag of the atmosphere slowed Solar Max down until it fell out of orbit. It finally crashed into the Indian Ocean, near Sri Lanka, on December 3, 1989.

What was it that had knocked Solar Max out of service for three and a half years of its working life?

The answer to that came when NASA's scientists studied the broken parts. The delicate instrument panels had been riddled with tiny holes, 150 of them in a surface area about the size of a card table. Solar Max had been struck with a blast of cosmic buckshot. Some of those tiniest bits of orbiting junk, impossible either to see or avoid, had collided with it and killed its instrumentation.

So the risk of collision with orbiting trash is real. It has not happened to just that one satellite, either. At least three others are known to have been, or are suspected of having been, damaged the same way; and, on at least one flight, so was the space shuttle itself.

On the third day of its July 1983 flight, the shuttle *Challenger*—yes, the same one that was destroyed a few years later when it exploded after launch—was hit with an object too small to be seen, but big enough to pit the glass in the pilot's windshield with a crater the size of a pea. Again, NASA's analysts showed the culprit: *Challenger* had been struck by a tiny flake of white paint, no doubt chipped off some old booster. Fortunately it had been only a glancing blow, but even so the screen had to be replaced (at a cost of \$50,000) before *Challenger* could fly again.

So the number of objects in the trash belt in space continues to grow, and most of them will remain in orbit for decades or even centuries, and there isn't any technological fix in prospect.

Worse still, if we should be unfortunate enough to see some current military projects grow to fruition—Star Wars, for instance—that orbiting minefield may fence us in so thoroughly as to prohibit future space projects from being accomplished at all.

Star Wars—officially named the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI—was the bill of goods Edward Teller sold Ronald Reagan in 1983. It was supposed to put a "nuclear umbrella" over America; its backers invested a fortune in TV commercials, showing a sweet little girl sleeping in perfect security, with the Russians presum-

ably gnashing their teeth in thwarted rage.

The opinion of most qualified scientists—at least, of those not employed by the project itself—is that there's no hope in the world that Star Wars can ever fulfill that promise. Even the project's own authorities have now cut their claims back, saying only that it can probably be used to protect some of our own missile launch pads against many of the ICBMs that would be launched against them. (The cities where sweet little girls sleep will have to take their chances.)

Whether even that claim is true, and whether that sort of limited defense is worth its staggering cost, is questionable. Some experts suggest that, in fact, Star Wars is more likely to provoke a nuclear attack than to prevent them. . . . yet the project won't die. In spite of everything, in spite of the changed relationships between the USSR and the USA, in spite of all the evidence that Star Wars is a bad idea, it still continues to be funded with billions of dollars every year. 22% of the increase in federally funded research and development from 1983 to 1989 went to Star Wars-related projects, as did 11% of all American R&D, public and private. Although, before the war in the Persian Gulf, the future of many new high-tech weapons was in some doubt, with much talk of cancelling them for a "peace dividend"; Star Wars had a charmed life. Then, of course, the swift and total American military victory in the Gulf revived all the high-tech warriors' hopes. The Patriot missile, the use of laser-guided "smart" bombs and many another new wonder weapon was hailed as the direct result of Star Wars research, and a justification for all its efforts.

None of those claims, of course, were true. Just how successful the new super-weapons were is hard to assess; all reports were censored by the military, and often colored for their own purposes. (For instance, although the bulk of naval missiles were launched from cruisers and destroyers, almost the only ones allowed to be reported were those launched from submarines and bat-

tle-ships—because the Navy wants them funded.) But to use a laser to guide a bomb is nothing like using a laser to blow up an enemy missile, and the Patriot (which was originally designed to attack enemy aircraft, not missiles, because it is totally useless against anything more sophisticated than the slow, clumsy Scud) was actually commissioned long before Star Wars was even a gleam in Ronald Reagan's eye.

All the same, the high-pressure public relations of the military and the defense contractors has certainly obscured the issue. It now seems highly likely that at least some elements of Star Wars will be built and put into orbit within the next few years.

What will the effects of that had idea be on the ecology of Low Earth Orbit?

We can get some idea by looking at past history—for instance, at the sorrowful story of the satellite called Solwind.

The astronomical research satellite designated P78-1—called "Solwind" for short—was launched from Vandenberg in February 1979. The principal instrument Solwind carried was a coronagraph—which is to say, a telescope equipped with an "occult-er" to block out the direct light of the Sun, so that the solar corona can be observed.

For six and a half years Solwind did the job it was designed for, churning out its pictures of the Sun's corona; it did even more than had been hoped, in fact, for example discovering a whole new class of sun-grazing comets. At times there were other science satellites observing the Sun. Some of them—the aforementioned Solar Max for one—were larger, newer and more sophisticated. But for the three and a half years while Solar Max was out of commission, Solwind was the only dedicated source of coronal data scientists had.

It was Star Wars that finally killed Solwind.

The Star Wars people have a history of conducting meaningless public-relations "tests" to make the taxpayer feel they're getting somewhere. Some of the tests are silly, if

not even fraudulent ("destroying" a target with a laser, without mentioning that the target was surrounded with mirrors to concentrate the radiation; "targeting" one of the shuttle flights with a radar impulse—as though an enemy missile would be as obliging as the shuttle in announcing its orbital plans). However meaningless, all of them are hyped as major breakthroughs. When, in 1985, they needed another "breakthrough" to keep the appropriations flowing, they decided to destroy a satellite in orbit.

They picked old Solwind as the victim.

They made it a point, of course, to tell the world that the satellite they had chosen to zap was not only obsolete but no longer working. Of course, neither statement was true. Nevertheless they went ahead, pulverizing the Solwind satellite on September 13, 1985. The scientists who had depended on it for data protested vigorously, but of course the Star Wars people simply ignored them.

Solwind doesn't deliver any data any more. Still, it isn't entirely gone. Of those 7,119 trackable trash fragments in orbit, about a hundred are the remaining blown-up pieces of Solwind.

If, against all common sense, Star Wars is sooner or later even partially deployed, the trash belt in Low Earth Orbit will be multiplied many times over—even if no orbital war is ever actually fought. For instance, if the Star Wars X-ray laser (which requires nuclear blasts for power) were ever deployed, it would necessitate a hundred or more nuclear reactors in orbit.

That isn't likely to happen; even the Star Warriors seem to have given up on the X-ray laser. Currently their best bet for *some* kind of orbital defense is the "brilliant pebbles" scheme proposed by the Lawrence Livermore scientist, Lowell Wood. Each pebble would be a complicated and expensive satellite about ten feet long, weighing 350 pounds, guided to attack the first enemy missile it sees by its own on-board computer—a very good computer, comparable to

a Cray-1, but less than a thousandth its size, filled with (as Wood says) "so much prior knowledge and detailed battle strategy and battle tactics" that "it can perform its purely defensive mission with no external supervision or coaching."

That is to say, the computer will decide for itself what to attack, and when. No human being will control it. (No such wonderful computer exists at present, either, but the Star Warriors are always hopeful.) And there will be thousands of these smart pebbles in orbit.

As we have seen from the studies of the two German scientists above (which were presented at the 1989 International Astronautical Federation meeting in Torremolinos) just adding all those additional bodies in orbit may make collisions almost inevitable, after which one big smashup could produce so much space junk that it could set off a chain reaction. It is not clear how many brilliant pebbles and associated hardware, even if never fired at an enemy in combat, could bring the number up to that point.

But some things are clear, and one of them is what happens if Star Wars actually is deployed, is committed to combat and actually works.

What happens then? How many tens or hundreds of thousands of trackable large hunks of junk (never mind the millions of tiny ones) would be left in orbit from the use or destruction of all those communications and control satellites, missile casings, even nuclear charges, of poplar lasers, smart rocks or brilliant pebbles and all the rest of the wonderland of high-tech, high-mass gadgets the Star Warriors wish to set spinning around the Earth over our heads?

How many centuries would it then be before a space program is possible again, without unacceptable risks of collision with some of those hurtling hunks of scrap?

Our space exploration has not merely trashed the Low Earth Orbits, it has done a job on the surface and the atmosphere of the planet as well. The two solid rockets for each shuttle launch burn seven hundred tons of ammonium perchlorate. The

chlorine this contains makes acid rain, for which reason the shuttle is only permitted to launch when the winds are blowing offshore, to keep the stuff from falling on Florida's cities and farmlands.

The chlorine in it may also contribute to ozone-layer destruction, and the fuel tank, which is a hundred and sixty tons of aluminum, definitely does. It produces aluminum oxide. That chemical isn't naturally found in the upper air, but when we put it there it produces particles which are just the right size to form "seeds" on which the ice crystals that facilitate ozone destruction can form.

Elsewhere in the world, the Soviets are right now trying to clean up several million acres of land in the district called Dzhezkazgan, just east of their rocket launch pads at the space base of Tyuratam.

Rockets have to be launched toward the east, to take advantage of the boost they get from the rotation of the Earth. The Soviets didn't happen to own a usable eastward-facing coast like Cape Canaveral, so they launched from the middle of the continent. That meant that the 890 launch-stage boosters launched from Tyuratam fell to the ground in the Dzhezkazgan region, where they still remain. They contain pumps and other parts which hold toxic fluids, so much of them that the soil there is now too contaminated to allow cattle to graze on it.

Of course, our American space program didn't have quite the same problem. Our own boosters and toxic chemicals all fell into the Atlantic Ocean. The difference, of course, is that ours are not visible, and so can't be cleaned up.

The space program is, by and large, one of the most wonderful and promising endeavors ever undertaken by the human race. It would be folly to abandon it. But it is even greater folly to fail to exercise caution in how we carry it out . . . if only because if we don't, we may reach a point when we can't have a space program at all. ♦

Under Twin Suns

Stephen L. Gillett

As AMAZING* Stories readers already know, most stars are not single children, like our Sun. Most are twins, or triplets, or even multiplets. Suns orbiting other suns is the norm. What about planets around a double sun? If most suns *are* multiple, galactic real estate is going to be restricted if they don't have worlds around them.

This notion, of course, has provided settings for numberless SF stories. But how realistic is it? When you put a planet into a binary star system, you have a three-body gravitational system, which can't be solved in general. (See my article on "Court-ing Chaos" in last month's issue for some reasons why.) It's a particularly difficult three-body problem at that, because the orbits of binary stars are commonly highly elliptical.

Anyway, planets may be possible, at least in certain cases. But there are lots of potential problems. Let's look at some of them in more detail.

The most important parameter for the binary is obvious: how far apart are the stars? If they're far enough apart, they're like two separate suns, and presumably each can have a family independently of the other. From one of the planetary systems, the other sun appears as a bright star at most.

How far is "far enough" apart? Anywhere from a hundred astronomical units (AU) or so up to a few tenths of a light year. (One AU, of course, is the average distance from Earth to the Sun. For comparison, the average distance of Pluto from

the Sun is less than 40 AU. A light-year—the distance light travels in one year—is about 63,000 AU.) That upper separation limit for the orbit is set by gravitational perturbations from other, nearby stars, which will disrupt the orbit if it's wider than a few tenths of a light-year—say more than about 10,000 AU.

We see many such widely separated binary stars. At such extreme separations, the orbital motion is tiny, so that it takes from thousands up to several million years for the stars to complete one orbit. How are they recognized as binary stars, then? One way is simple proximity in the sky—if they're close together, *and* at essentially the same distance, they must be binary. At very wide separations, your initial clue may be that the stars are traveling in parallel through the sky. Astronomers call these "common proper motion" (CPM) stars. ("Proper motion" is the "true" motion of the stars in the sky, which is due to a combination of their actual motion and the Solar System's. Proper motion is very small, but it causes the constellations to change slowly over centuries.)

For closer binaries, say on the order of tens of AU, the stars start to impinge on each other, and arranging planetary systems may be more of a problem, as the gravitational effects from the second star will perturb any planetary orbits. Even so, approximate results from celestial mechanics suggest that planets could exist in stable orbits. In other words,

there are zones around each star where planetary motion is "bounded"—that is, although the orbit changes from one revolution to the next, it will never get out of a ring-shaped zone around the star. (Again, see my article on chaos.) Such a zone, of course, is necessary for the planet to be stable over geologic time.

Even though places for stable orbits exist, though, it's not clear at all that planets could form there in the first place. Some recent modeling suggests that planets couldn't accrete with a second star roiling the condensing nebula.

To see why, we have to talk a bit about how planets accumulate, or "accrete," during the original condensation of a star and its planetary system.

We don't understand accretion in detail, but it appears that a first step is for grains of dust to chemically precipitate out of the material surrounding the forming star. Close in, where the nebula is hot, these grains will consist of metal and rock; out farther, they'll be mostly ices. The grains then accrete into asteroid-sized bodies called "planetesimals," and these in turn accrete into planets.

The step where you accrete planetesimals into planets is a critical one, however. For this to work, the planetesimals have to touch very gently indeed; otherwise they don't stick but shatter. They're still much too small to have any significant gravity to help hold them together.

Now, to touch so gently means

the planetesimals must be in nearly circular, concentric orbits. In this way they can come together tangentially at very slow speeds.

However, if there is another star orbiting the protosun, it disrupts these almost-circular planetesimal orbits. It tugs on them with its own gravity, and one effect of that is that the orbits tend to become more elliptical. Thus you end up with planetesimals in elliptical orbits crossing each other—and when they hit under those circumstances, they hit *hard*. They don't accrete.

This seems to have happened in our own Solar System. Between Mars at 1.5 AU and Jupiter at 5.2 AU we have no planet, just a bunch of debris: the asteroids. What happened? Jupiter probably kept the asteroids—which are leftover planetesimals—from accreting. Jupiter probably slung most asteroids out of the Belt early on; only a small fraction in exceptionally stable orbits are left. (As we'll see below, Jupiter probably accreted about the same time the Sun itself did, before the inner planets. The Sun was *almost* a binary system—had Jupiter been a bit bigger, so that the thermonuclear fires could ignite in its core, Sol, too, would have been a twin sun.)

This proximity problem is compounded with another: most binary stars separated by more than 10 AU or so have orbits with large eccentricities. That is, rather than being nearly circular, the orbits are obviously elliptical. Many times they're markedly so and look like squashed footballs.

The upshot is that the stars are *much* closer to one another at some times than others. In these cases the average distance of the suns is irrelevant; the critical distance determining whether accretion will occur will be that closest approach. The gravity is much more effective then.

For an example, the average separation of the two main stars in Alpha Centauri is 24.3 AU, a bit more than the distance from the Sun to Uranus. However, their orbital eccentricity is 0.52. This means that they range from 35.6 AU apart—almost as far as Pluto is from Sol—to as close as 11.2 AU, or about as far

as from the Sun to Saturn! (In case you're wondering, Proxima Centauri, the third member of the system, is about 10,000 AU away from the others and has no effect—you can't even see it with the naked eye.)

Why do such wider pairs have high eccentricities? Well, for contrast, most binary stars with small spacings, less than a few AU or so, have nearly circular orbits, like those of the planets in our Solar System. Probably we're seeing two different processes of binary star formation. Pairs wider than 10 AU form by condensation of two different parts of the original nebula, whereas close binaries probably form from a single condensation that later subdivided. This second process is probably also the one that forms planetary systems; if the nebula breaks up into several smaller clumps instead of one, you end up with several giant planets instead of a second sun. As I said above, Jupiter in our own system can be thought of as an aborted star.

For stars even closer, of course, there's an obvious problem with having planets: even if they could accrete, there's no room left! Where are you going to fit an Earth if your suns are only 1 AU apart?

But for suns that are *very* close, we may have some interesting possibilities indeed. If they're, say, within a tenth of an AU (15 million km), we could truly have twin suns; planets—maybe even Earthlike planets—could orbit *both*, as though around a single sun. That could make for delightful sunrises!

There are some problems here, too, of course.

The accretion problems shouldn't be so bad, because from out where the planets would accrete, the suns look pretty much like a single gravity field. Gravitational perturbations should be a lot smaller.

But there are new problems. Such close stars interact *a lot*, and the closer they are, the more things that happen—things that will have major effects on a planetary system!

The first thing to consider is tidal effects. What is a tide? A tide results from the difference in gravity across an object, and it's due to the fact that real planets are not points but

have a finite size. Consider the Earth and Moon, for example. Their gravity is exactly in balance with the centrifugal force of their orbit only at their centers. (All right, for you physicists out there: I know it's not that simple. But I only have 3,000 words!) The surfaces toward each other feel an extra gravitational tug, and the surfaces facing away feel extra centrifugal force. So the Earth and Moon are stretched out, pointing both toward and away from each other. That's a tidal bulge.

For the Earth and Moon, the tidal bulge is small. But for two stars a few million kilometers apart, though, it's large. That's only a few star diameters apart, and both stars are stretched markedly into egg shapes.

The stars also orbit quickly, in a matter of a few hours. Because of this, they're roiled much more than usual because they're forced to spin so fast. They have high sunspot activity, high flare activity, and their surfaces are seething much more than normal. Why is this? Stars have powerful magnetic fields internally, and these magnetic fields stir up the star-stuff profoundly when they're made to travel through it rapidly. Stars are made of plasma—ionized gas—after all, and a plasma is an electrical conductor because of its ionization. (In a plasma, some electrons are detached from the atoms, so that you have a mixture of negatively charged electrons and positively charged atoms.) It's just as though you were drawing copper wire through a magnetic field in a generator; you feel a resistance, and you're forcing an electric current to flow in the wire. Since their orbital motions force them to turn once every few hours, the magnetic fields are dragged around at a terrific rate.

By contrast, the Sun spins slowly, only about once a month, and its magnetic field doesn't get stirred very fast. Even so, the well-known 11-year sunspot cycle results from the progressive twisting up of the Sun's magnetic field and its subsequent untwisting.

This magnetic resistance has another effect: it brakes the stars' orbital motion, and thus causes their mutual orbit to slowly decay. As I

said, running stellar plasma through the magnetic field creates electric current, and that current drives intense "stellar winds"—flows of charged particles out from the stars. These winds steal energy from the orbit. (For purists, gravitational waves, predicted by general relativity, also cause some braking, but it's less important.)

In fact, the reason our Sun spins so slowly is that its rotation was braked long ago by its magnetic field working against the solar wind. But a close binary pair *can't* slow down; their own orbital motion forces them to keep turning quickly.

So when stars start out very close, they will get closer because of orbital decay. This seems like a catastrophic situation a-building; what happens when they get *too* close?

They merge, eventually. But there are a lot of fireworks first.

The first thing that happens is that the larger star fills its Roche lobe, and gas from it starts spilling over onto the other star. What's the Roche lobe? It's the limit, which you can calculate mathematically, within which the star can hold itself together with its own gravity against the tidal effects—i.e., the pull of the other star. (Roche, pronounced "roash," was the French physicist who worked this out.)

I mentioned the tidal bulge of the stars above. When the inner edge of the tidal bulge finally encounters the Roche limit, gas will start spilling off the star there and begin falling onto the other one. The larger star spills over first because it's less dense; or, in other words, since this star takes up more space it's the first to run up against the Roche limit. (By the way, Charles Sheffield and Robert Forward have both written stories set on double planets, in which the Roche lobe is important to the setting.)

The gas doesn't fall straight in, however. It still has the orbital speed of the star it fell from, so it spirals in, falling in only as rapidly as that speed can be dissipated by friction. This spiraling gas makes an "accretion disk," a disk of extremely hot gas embracing the smaller star like the rings of Saturn.

At this point the pair has become a "contact binary." Once the stars

have gotten to this point, they greatly disrupt each other's evolution because they're exchanging mass. As the large star loses mass to the smaller, it burns more dimly, and it may even shrink to the point where it stops losing mass. Conversely, as the smaller star gains mass it swells and burns hotter; and eventually it will lose mass back to the original star. And so on, back and forth, as the orbit inexorably decays.

This progressive decay is why few main-sequence stars are close binaries. And that's significant for planets, at least for habitable planets. The "main sequence" is a band of temperature, or color, versus total brightness on which over ninety percent of stars fall. A star is on the main sequence when it derives its energy from fusing hydrogen into helium—which stars do for most of their lives as luminous bodies. A habitable planet is extremely unlikely around anything but a long-lived main-sequence star, partly because you need a very long time to evolve a habitable planet, and partly because some very catastrophic things happen when a star leaves the main sequence.

How does the orbital decay of a close binary shorten the main-sequence life? As follows: On the main sequence, the more massive the star, the more luminous it is—and the shorter-lived it is. Both these effects come about because the hydrogen fusion goes *much* faster as you increase the mass. Hence, the main sequence ranges from faint red dwarfs with lifetimes of over a trillion years, through moderate yellow stars like the Sun, to extremely bright blue giant stars like Rigel that will burn out in less than ten million years. So you can see that shuffling mass back and forth, along with the steady orbital decay, is liable to take two initially main-sequence stars off the main sequence pretty quickly.

Then obviously, once the fireworks start, things get *very* awkward for any planets. For one thing, when the system evolves into a contact binary, the hard radiation from the accretion disk is liable to fry the inner planetary system, and in any event the increased luminosity will disrupt—perhaps catastrophically—the climate

on any Earthlike planets. In fact, as the orbit continues to dwindle the ever-increasing speed of the revolving stars can throw gas right out of the system. It's a bit like taking an electric mixer out of the batter without turning it off first.

Finally, there are a fair number of contact binaries whose members are *not* on the main sequence, and these are often called "cataclysmic binaries," for good reasons. You can get some very spectacular effects indeed from the mass spillover under those conditions! Classical novae, for example, are cataclysmic binaries. A nova, of course, is a star that briefly increases hundreds to thousands of times in brightness every few decades, only to subside back to its original brightness later. Novae consist of a white dwarf—an extremely dense (planet-sized), burned-out star, and a red giant. A red giant has exhausted the hydrogen fuel in its core, and because of this has swelled vastly in size as it begins fusing helium into carbon in its core instead. When the red giant expanded, it began spilling gas onto its white-dwarf companion. As the outer part of the red giant is still hydrogen, a layer of hydrogen slowly accumulates on the dead, but extremely dense and still very hot white dwarf.

Eventually the pressures build up to the point that the hydrogen layer detonates as a planet-sized hydrogen bomb. That's the nova outburst. After that, hydrogen begins accumulating again. . . .

X-ray stars are even more bizarre: A red giant orbits a black hole, and gas spills off the giant to make an accretion disk around the black hole. The black hole is so dense that gas falling into it is heated to extremely high temperatures, high enough to generate X-rays.

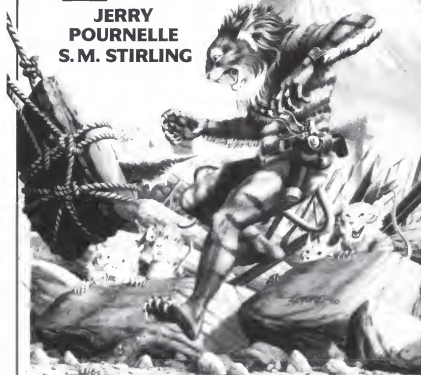
Of course, under these circumstances, any planets that survived would be interesting places to visit, but you *wouldn't* want to live there!

And that gets me back to the main subject: Are there planets around binary stars? There may be, and if so, some may have some of the most spectacular scenery in the Galaxy. To be sure, though, we'll just have to go take a look. . . . ♦

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Book Reviews



Madlands

by K. W. Jeter
St. Martin's Press
256 pages, \$18.95 (hardcover)

K. W. Jeter has at last returned to science fiction. Previously he renounced SF, saying he was off to better things as a horror writer. Unfortunately for Jeter—and fortunately for his loyal SF readers—that promising horror career seems to have largely fizzled.

His latest novel, *Madlands*, is a return to the quirky sort of future Jeter does best. Here, the protagonist, Trayne, is a citizen of Los Angeles of the future . . . a place where reality is constructed entirely from the consciousness of an insane megalomaniac preacher. Due to some weird (psychic? psychological? psychoactive?) characteristic of the area, people gradually lose their abilities to hold patterns. They mutate weirdly, lose their minds, or both simultaneously. That sounds plenty bad—and it is—but there are more than a few thrills to be had in the *Madlands* as well. As your body starts to break down, you experience new sensations, almost like an expanded consciousness. And of course it's addictive.

Trayne works for the preacher's television show—he steals dance routines from classic movies and restages them with zombie-like dancers. But despite his happy existence, Trayne is at heart a malcontent. He accepts a contract to kill the

preacher and so starts down the path to certain doom. Or is it?

Trayne is also a d-ranger, capable of swapping bodies at will to keep himself healthy. When his original body wakes up on its own, Trayne finds he's suddenly lost his ability to switch bodies. His old body now has a hick personality, and begins playing games with reality (it can completely change everything at will . . . and does several times).

If all this sounds complicated, rest assured, it is. But Jeter is a good enough writer to pull it all together, to make the insensible make sense and to make the unreal at least moderately believable. Fans of Philip K. Dick's work couldn't look for a better substitute: *Madlands* reads like vintage Dick, and a higher compliment I cannot make. —JGB

Black Cocktail

by Jonathan Carroll
St. Martin's Press
80 pages, \$13.95 (hardcover)

Black Cocktail is the second novella from a British hardcover series to be published in the U. S. (The first was Greg Bear's *Heads*, reviewed previously in these pages.) In *Black Cocktail*, master fantasist Jonathan Carroll weaves an intense, gritty, and thoroughly fascinating story out of some pretty diverse plot threads: a radio talk show host who runs a call-in program for crazies (the more outlandish their proposed ideas, the weirder the calls they get, and the

higher the ratings); his new gay lover; a boy from that lover's past who hasn't aged in the last twenty years; and a quest for a cosmic unity.

Carroll seems to be largely an acquired taste: his stories are character-driven, and often eschew traditional plot-logic in favor of character development. They also tend toward the dark and (at times) the darkly comic. Carroll's usual readers will doubtless have a great time with *Black Cocktail*, though with its strong gay element, few traditional fantastic elements, and leisurely pace, I'm not certain it will win him many new fans.

I note, too, that St. Martin's Press has again used the British pages in their book. For shame! *Black Cocktail* is only 80 pages long; they certainly could have paid to typeset it in the President's American. —JGB

Writer's Chapbook Series

Pulphouse Publishing
\$5.00 (each)

Pulphouse—under its Writer's Notebook Press imprint—has been quietly putting out pamphlets of interest to new and would-be writers. The first few were written by Kristine Kathryn Rusch on such basic elements as plot and setting. Later pamphlets have reprinted—or printed for the first time—essays by other established writers on more general topics.

The latest five are:
"Mythic Realism in Fantasy," by Nancy Springer (#24)



"Writers' Workshops," by James Patrick Kelly (#25)

"Workshops: The Minefields of Science Fiction," by Steve Perry (#26)

"Faking the Reader Out," by Damon Knight (#27)

"Professionalism," by Jerry Olition (#28)

Springer explains—in a brief, non-nonsense manner—why fantasy must be made as realistic as possible, and why (knowing this rule) you should break it. Interesting points if you haven't encountered them before.

Kelly and Perry provide complementary essays on workshops. Kelly gives an overview, telling what to look for in a writer's workshop before you join, while Perry talks about the how they actually work, traps the neo-workshopper can fall into, and how to avoid the same. They make an interesting pair of essays; anyone thinking of starting or joining a writer's workshop would be well advised to read both.

Damon Knight's essay on story construction has a lot of meat on it. I don't agree with everything he recommends, particularly with his insistence on linear structure in stories. (Damon dislikes stories that start in the middle, backtrack to fill in what's happened, and then return to "present" in story-time.) Examples of *in medias res* storytelling abound: probably the best-known offender is Homer.

Would-be writers would be well advised to keep Kipling's verse

about tribal lays in mind when reading this or any advice on writing. Even so, there is more than enough good material in Damon's article to make it worth reading.

Lastly, Olition's essay on professionalism (seemingly cribbed from various reference works put out by George Scithers while he was editor of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and *AMAZING* Stories*) is of use for someone who needs to learn how to type up a manuscript so an editor will have no trouble reading its format.

The whole series will doubtless be of interest to anyone who wants to write professionally. Although there are countless other reference books out there, here you can pick the essays you want to concentrate on and skip the rest. Write and ask for the whole list. — JGB

Halo

by Tom Maddox
Tor Books, November 1991
288 pages, \$18.95 (hardcover)

A few years back William Gibson wrote *Neuromancer*, and Cyberpunk was born. It was the hot new Movement and many authors jumped on the bandwagon and waited for the parade to start.

I was never a fan of Cyberpunk. There are some very skilled authors who wrote Cyberpunk—Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Walter Jon Williams, Pat Cadigan—but I found a lot of stuff that seemed to think that "Cy-

berpunk" meant that "well-written" wasn't also a requirement—too much was either derivative of Gibson, or simply boring.

Cyberpunk faded quickly as people stopped pushing it, but that doesn't mean there was no good Cyberpunk written, or that Cyberpunk stopped when the crowds went home. Cyberpunk failed because people tried to create a Movement before there was a body of work available. A few good books doesn't constitute a Movement.

Halo, Tom Maddox's first novel, is a book that fulfills the promise of the Cyberpunk Movement, although whether it's really Cyberpunk or simply influenced by it is up for discussion. What *Halo* is really looking at is the societal issues created by Virtual Reality—the ability to take a person and put him or her in an environment created and controlled by a computer. This was a theme that was first examined in Vernor Vinge's *True Names*, and I'm glad authors are starting to take a close look at the concept.

Especially one as good as Maddox. He had me hooked early, and he convinced me he really understood Virtual Reality when he had two computer programs (each essentially an individual's electronic Daytimer) compare information by creating an environment and then having their electronic personas talk to each other. Why would programs share data in the same way they interact with their people? Because

there is a difference between data and information, and information requires understanding the context the data is transferred in as well as the secondary, implied, subconscious cues found in normal discussion.

For Artificial Intelligence to become a reality—for Virtual Realities to become practical, also—computers have to make the jump between processing data and dealing with information. Computers are very good and very fast and moving data around—but very stupid at figuring out what to do with it unless their programmer baby-steps them through the entire process.

Aleph, the program that runs the Halo space station, has made that jump and become aware. It is also trying to save the consciousness of one of its friends who has been injured by bringing him into a virtual reality and stabilizing him so he can survive after the body dies. Not everybody is thrilled with what Aleph has become, and so there is some question whether he is going to be allowed to survive—or going to be unplugged.

This is an exceptional book. The plot is good, but what really made it for me was watching Maddox take the concepts of AI and Virtual Reality and play with them. It's not just a good first novel, but one of the outstanding books of the year, and one of my few candidates for a Hugo nomination next year. Whether you like Cyberpunk or not, Halo should be considered a must-read for lovers of SF. — CVR

Mirabile

by Janet Kagan
Tor Books, October 1991
256 pages, \$18.95 (hardcover)

I have to admit I came into this book with the wrong attitude. Any book that titles chapters "The Loch Moose Monster" or "The Flowering Inferno" or "Frankenswine" has to be a funny book, right?

Janet Kagan does have a dry and effective sense of humor, of the sort that I enjoy in Steven Brust's books, but it's kept in the background in *Mirabile*. Instead of belly laughs, we

have a hard-SF book that takes a serious look at what it means to colonize an alien planet and what happens when an Earth-based ecology (and the associated human population) are introduced into something completely unrelated—and alien.

Very alien. *Mirabile* isn't just North Dakota with purple leaves on the trees. Kagan does a lot of research into ecology and a large amount of work into creating a practical ecology that really is different, whether it is sitting in a boat on Loch Moose and watching the trees smoke (actually very heavy pollen releases) or trying to keep settlements from burning down in forest fires caused by pyrotechnic trees. (Could a tree catch itself on fire? Why would a tree want to burn down the forest around it? Kagan's biology and ecology are feasible on the first question, and you'll have to read the book to find out why.)

For good measure, she tosses in Earth-based ecology. Before the colonization ship left for *Mirabile*, it was given a stock of genetic material from most of Earth's plant and animal species. These stocks were given a twist, though: the genetic engineers on Earth installed the genes of multiple species into each DNA string and then encrypted it to keep it dormant unless it was needed. Unfortunately, they didn't consider evolution: the genetic structure of animals isn't static, and under certain circumstances, previously dormant genetic material might be partially or completely activated.

This has good and bad points, which is where Mother Jason, head of the "Jasons," the group in charge of the ecology of the planet, encouraging the positive mutations (and taking care of the negative ones), comes in. A colony in an alien environment is going to be a marginal endeavor for a while, and nothing can be taken for granted. When something new pops up, it has to be evaluated and either integrated into the ecology or neutralized. If that's a red daffodil, that's not so bad. Sometimes, though, you get a "Dragon's Tooth"—either a very destructive species, or something that is a mix

of various bits and pieces that would destroy *Mirabile* if allowed to survive and breed.

Trying to keep everything in balance is difficult, and Kagan does a wonderful job of showing just how complex a planetwide ecology can be, and how difficult it is deciding what compromises are necessary, especially when a mistake can mean failure of the entire colony.

What really attracted me to this book, though, is what I can only define as the "sensawonder" that was part of the works of people like Hal Clement or Robert Heinlein. This isn't just another interchangeable quest novel (or interchangeable space war novel, or interchangeable generic novel of any time), but a good story told in a unique and fascinating environment. — CVR

Winds of Fate

by Mercedes Lackey
DAW Books, October 1991
387 pages, \$18.95 (hardcover)

Winds of Fate is Mercedes Lackey's tenth book set in the Valdemar universe, and the first book in the new "The Mage Winds" trilogy. As this series starts, Ancar of Hardorn is building the forces he needs to finally overthrow Valdemar—forces that include a number of powerful mages. The seriousness of the threat is made clear when Elspeth, a Herald and heir to the throne, is almost killed in an assassination attempt. Shortly thereafter, a magical attack breaks through the shield that protects Valdemar and seriously damages an outpost. This makes it clear they can no longer ignore the happenings beyond their borders.

Elspeth convinces the council that what is needed to protect Valdemar is a mage (or mages) willing to join Valdemar to support them and to begin the training of those that have magic potential. She is chosen to travel outside of Valdemar to search for the people who can help them.

While this is happening, Darkwind, a mage-scout in the lands of the K'Sheyna, is trying to protect his people from dangers within and without. While attempting to transfer



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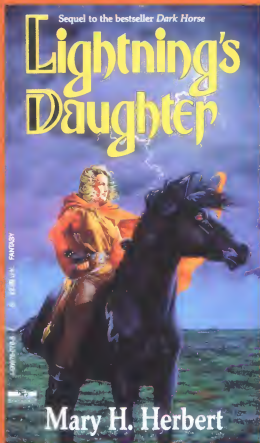
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Change the Destiny of the Dark Horse Plains



When a renegade chieftain steals an ancient and priceless tome of forbidden magic, the clans of the Dark Horse Plains turn to Gabria, the outcast sorceress, to save them.

Bold, brash, and daring, Gabria pursues the renegade to the far-away city of Pra Deth, but she cannot capture the thief before he summons a terrifying, immortal creature from the realm of the dead.

With the help of the magical Hunnuli horses and a ragtag group of allies, outcast sorcerers like herself, Gabria must stop this monstrous evil. If she can overcome the deadly threat to the clans, Gabria can win a place for magic in the world she loves — if not, the Dark Horse Plains will be destroyed.

Mary H. Herbert's newest book, *Lightning's Daughter*, is on sale in December at book and hobby stores everywhere. It is the exciting sequel to her best-selling fantasy novel, *Dark Horse*.



Web of Futures
Jefferson P. Swycaffer



Sorcerer's Stone
L. Dean James



The Falcon Rises
Michael C. Staudinger



Token of
Dragonsblood
Damaris Cole



The Cloud People
Robert B. Kelly

their village to a new location in the forest, their Heartstone (the vessel of power for the village) malfunctioned (if such a word is truly applicable in magic), destroying the gate while the transfer was still in process and stranding part of the clan in the new (unknown) location with the rest stuck in the existing village. The leader, Starblade (Darkwind's father) is doing little, holding out hope that the Heartstone will heal itself over time—a thought that Darkwind and many others consider unlikely. There are external enemies, also, as more frequent and larger attacks on the borders of the village begin—yet Starblade refuses to reinforce the scouts protecting the village.

As Elspeth and her bodyguard, another Herald named Skif, travel to the mage-school at Bolthaven with their Companions (magical beings who travel in the guise of horses and act as guides and protectors of the Heralds), Elspeth realizes that she's been manipulated into this quest by the Council—who in turn, she finds out, were manipulated by the Companions. She refuses to meekly follow the path laid out for her, so she sets off on her own search for the solution.

Which, of course, leads her to Darkwind and the K'Sheyna. Just as the evil mage Falconsbane attacks. Who wins? . . . Well, you won't know for sure until Book Two.

The plot summary above doesn't really do Lackey justice. In less skilled hands it wouldn't be very interesting or original, but she is a skilled writer who is adept at taking common fictional situations and making them fresh and alive by injecting unusual viewpoints and fascinating detail work. I'm somewhat at a disadvantage for not having read any previous books by her—she takes for granted some things that I'm sure are covered in previous volumes (why Valdemar is so short of mage-talent is hinted at, but never really explained; and what the Companions really are is things called "Guardian Spirits," but what Guardian Spirits are is left a mystery), and it wasn't until halfway through the book that enough of the back-

ground was explained for me to really understand what was going on.

While this might have kept me from finishing many books, it didn't here—this one is well-written, carefully plotted and quite enjoyable, even without my knowing much of the history of Valdemar. The only real criticism with the book is that it is the first book in a trilogy—and it doesn't really have an ending. It comes to a reasonable stopping point and puts everything on hold until the next book, with nothing major resolved and a lot of issues left hanging. That *does* bother me, but the same phenomenon bothers me in most multibook series published these days, which is one reason I don't read many trilogies any more. Too many trilogies are just flabby, padded novels in disguise, and if an author can't break a story up into self-contained volumes with proper endings, I'm just not that interested in it.

I made an exception to this posture for *Winds of Fate*, and I'm glad I did. Whether you're already a Lackey fan or not, it's a good book and worth your time. — CVR

Full Spectrum 3

Edited by Lou Aronica, Amy Stout, and Betsy Mitchell
Bantam Books, June 1991
535 pages, \$11.00 (trade paper)

The *Full Spectrum* series of original anthologies has a simple purpose: to publish the best short fiction being written in the field. It is the latest in a long series of anthologies with that goal, including Terry Carr's *Universe*, Damon Knight's *Orbit* and Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions*. While the quality of the first book in the series was unmatched (there were ten separate stories I nominated for the Hugo in that one volume), Volume 2 was disappointing—not bad, just not up to the expectations set by the first book.

I looked to this volume, then, for an indication on whether this series is going to be something special, or just another anthology.

The news is good. If *Full Spectrum 3* doesn't quite match the high

standards set with #1, it's not for lack of trying, and the editors have no reason to be ashamed of the results. The centerpiece of this book, Michael Bishop's "Apartheid, Superstrings and Mordecai Thubana" is a semi-metaphysical, semi-science-fictional look at the serious issue of Apartheid in South Africa. Bishop's work should be an award finalist, if not a winner. Bishop isn't alone: James Morrow's "Daughter Earth" (a metaphysical investigation of the Gaia theory), Kris Rusch's "Precious Moments," Ursula Le Guin's "Newton's Sleep" and Gregory Benford's "Matter's End" (a fascinating story with echoes of Clarke's "Nine Billion Names of God"—but different) all stand out as excellent stories and might well anchor any other book, but here they take a back seat to the Bishop story and to Peg Kerr's "Lethe," where life and death, healing and letting slip away all meld together in a truly unforgettable work.

Special mention should also be made of Ted Chiang's "Division by Zero," in which he proves that the basic tenets of mathematics are false, and then deals with the problems that occur when you find out that everything you know is—literally—wrong. This is Chiang's third published story. His first won a Nebula award. All three have blown me away—Chiang is definitely, even this early in his career, an important voice on the rise and someone that you want to keep an eye out for.

Full Spectrum 3 is a great success. The weakest of the stories is still pretty good, and there's enough really strong fiction in it that it should be considered essential reading by anyone serious about quality fiction in the SF world. — CVR

The Elvenbane

by Andre Norton and Mercedes Lackey
Tor Books, November 1991
384 pages, \$19.95 (hardcover)

For the past couple of years, reviewers (myself included) have been pointing out books by newer writers and saying "this is like the good old Andre Norton stuff you read as a

kid," as if Norton had retired and been put out to pasture. The arrival of *The Elvenbane* proves otherwise; Norton and collaborator Mercedes Lackey have spun a brisk, glittering yarn that packs as much action, suspense, and twisting of convention into one novel as many writers invest in whole trilogies.

Three races share the world portrayed in the book, but only humans are native to it. Both the dragons (who call themselves the Kin) and the elves are colonists from other realities, but the two races arrived at different times, and the Kin have taken great care to keep others from learning of their presence. By contrast, the elves have largely conquered humanity and subjugated it into a slave race.

But elves and humans are cross-fertile, and their halfblood offspring possess remarkable powers of wizardry. Though the elves have tried to stamp out such renegades, a few survive, and legend (encouraged by the dragons) says that one will rise up to break the elves' power. That one is apparently Shana, raised by dragonkind and later discovered by members of a halfblood underground, who precipitates events that lead to confrontations between all three races.

The characterizations of each race are clever and well balanced. Where the elves are ruthless masters of both people and the environment, the dragons tend toward subtlety and studiousness; magical abilities also vary from race to race. Individual personalities are also convincing, though the rapid pace tends to make them rather set in their opinions—there simply isn't time for everyone to have doubts about what they're up to.

Though the book stands by itself (and really could have been expanded to a trilogy without feeling pad-

ded), the rush of events leaves a few odds and ends for which there's no real payoff. A question raised about one elf-lord's parentage is left hanging, a halfblood wizard's antagonism toward Shana gets a viewpoint scene and then disappears, and a key betrayal is made by a character who pops out of nowhere. None of the continuity-leaps is really serious, but collectively, they're just prominent enough to be noticeable.

The Elvenbane's real virtue, though, is that it combines its sense of breakneck adventure with a bit of sly playfulness that acknowledges its plentiful literary ancestors (watch in particular for nods toward Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* books and a famous line from Tolkien). In a sense, Norton and Lackey are doing for old-fashioned fantasy swashbuckling what the Indiana Jones films did for Saturday afternoon movie serials. They've clearly had a lot of fun in the process, and so should their readers. — JCB

Playgrounds of the Mind

by Larry Niven

Tor Books, October 1991

528 pages, \$22.95 (hardcover)

You almost don't have to read the fiction in this new Larry Niven book. Just skipping through reading the commentary is enough to make the collection worthwhile.

This work is a billed as a sequel to *N-Space*, but "sequel" really isn't quite the right word. The two books are really halves of a sort of literary encyclopedia, including fiction, biographical notes, funny odds and ends, and observations on anything in which Niven may find of interest. (Imagine what Isaac Asimov's autobiography would have been like with three or four story collections sprinkled through it, and you get the idea.)

There's more commentary and anecdotal material this time around, percentage-wise; that's just fine, though, because Niven proves himself one of the wisest and most amiable observers of the SF world. Whether he's telling convention stories, recounting the arcane machinations of modern publishers, discussing real and invented scientific phenomena, or describing the writing process itself, Niven's comments are crisp, to the point, and often as amusing as they are informative.

The material in *Playgrounds of the Mind* is wide-ranging in multiple senses. We have novel excerpts, short fiction, reminiscences, essays, an SF-convention progress report (for TrantorCon, to be held in the year 23,309), a masquerade script from the 1984 WorldCon, a song lyric, and a recipe for Irish coffee(!). There's SF from the magazines, from the comics, and (by description, at least) from television. There's fantasy, where we learn that Niven's contributions to the *Arabesques* anthologies draw on his "Warlock" universe. And while much of the fiction is familiar, some of it is newly collected, and a few bits are drawn from books not yet published.

Dickard Niven fans will want this for the plentiful side-notes and the stories seeing book publication for the first time. But they're far from the only audience for the book. It's eminently recommendable, along with *N-Space*, as a primer for readers new either to Niven or to SF generally (but on reissues of the excerpted novels in the near future). And it's a fresh, perceptive chronicle of SF fandom and the writing process, which students of either should find readable and enlightening. — JCB ♦

In the Land of No



N. Lee Wood

"Tomiko!" she heard him cry. The sound of his voice pierced through her distracted thoughts. She leapt to her feet, silk robes swirling as she turned toward him, reflecting in the large wall mirror like trails of blood from a thousand fish in an azure sea.

The fusuma doors slid open, the paper screens pulled back by unseen hands as Yoshi stumbled inside, still in *No* costume. A dragon's mask covered his face; two small eyes peered blindly through the dusk. She could hear the evening crowd, somewhere just below the range of true sound, as they emptied out of the old brick-and-mortar, nineteenth-century theatre building into a Tokyo of bright neon lights and twentieth-century skyscrapers and aging, acid air.

How careless she'd been! The play was finished and she sat dreaming of Isao, like a lovestruck schoolchild, inattentive.

"Tomiko, you insolent girl! Where are you?" The dragon

Illustration by Haruhiko M. G. Sengoku

turned, a muddle of brightly embroidered silk and disheveled mane around his tall, wiry frame. The grotesque head bobbed in a manner unbefitting to a noble beast. Behind him trailed Kiochi, his sole *broken* assistant, the boy's eyes wide with nervousness. Kiochi closed the fusuma screens silently.

"Here, Yoshi-san," Tomiko said, hurrying to him, and quickly grasped both of his hands in hers, leading him into the sparsely furnished room. "Forgive me, I'm so sorry . . . I did not hear the end of the play. . . ."

The dragon sank onto the zabuton she led him to, his favorite floor cushion old and frayed. He wrenched his hands roughly away from hers. "Then there is no tea ready, I suppose?" he said irritably, his voice masked behind the dragon's face. There was no mistaking, however, the malevolence in his tone—dark, brooding, coiling around his words like an evil spirit waiting to strike.

"The water is hot . . . it will take but a moment."

"No excuses!" the dragon hissed. A lingering sense of otherworldliness in her eyes could see the ethereal smoke rising from the woodcarved face, the life flaring the painted nostrils. Then the dragon seemed to crumple a bit, as if the energy it had received from the *No* play had slowly ebbed away. It was but a few moments before her eyes saw not the fearsome dragon of the *No*, but only Yoshi Gorosuke, frail aging *No* actor.

Tomiko busied herself with the preparation of the tea, whisking the green leaves in an unhurried, businesslike manner. She glanced at Yoshi out of the side of her eyes, watching him as he turned toward the fusuma screens, listening intently. She set the tea in front of him on a low, carved table.

As the steam rose from the tiny teacups, Yoshi leaned toward her. She did not look up, pouring out the hot tea into the porcelain cup. "No one will come in, do you think?" Yoshi whispered, a tinge of fear in his voice.

It was always the same question, one she never quite understood, really, why he bothered to ask. No one would ever be so impolite as to walk into the actor's tiny private dressing room unannounced or uninvited. The story of his heroic war injuries was well known, and the famous *No* actor's eccentricities respected. It would be unthinkable, and yet for the past twenty years, night after night, Yoshi had asked the same question without fail.

"No one will come in, Yoshi-san," she assured him.

She leaned back on her heels, waiting for him to make his wish known to her, not that she did not know from long experience his odd quirks, his habits. The dragon's head weaved from side to side, as if he listened to the spirits of those who inhabited the theatre, searching in the air for the voices of invisible *kami*.

"Help me get this damned thing off," Yoshi said to Kiochi finally. In a smooth, practiced motion, Tomiko rose and, parting her kimono very slightly at the knees, walked to a place behind him while Kiochi knelt in front of the actor. The dragon mask came off smoothly in his hands as she untied it. Kiochi handed the mask to Yoshi, keeping his eyes averted from the actor's face. Yoshi saluted the mask—somewhat perfunctorily, she

thought—and shoved it back toward Kiochi. From behind him, she watched him impatiently remove the heavy wig. Then he dropped it and the wigband carelessly onto the floor. She picked up the discarded dragon's mane, placing it with the mask neatly in one corner by the mirror, and kept her back to him as he grunted, pulling his everyday hood over his head.

Poor Kiochi looked stricken, not yet inured to the master's abrupt moods and frequent bad-tempered irreverence. Unlike those of the other actors in the company, Yoshi's private rooms served as both his green room and mirror-room. Also unlike other actors, only Kiochi was permitted to dress Yoshi in his costumes and help him with his carved mask. However, Tomiko thought, seeing her private thoughts reflected in the boy's naked expression, that shouldn't excuse Yoshi from showing the things of the *No* the respect they deserved.

"The tea is cold, Tomiko. Bah!" Yoshi cursed, and pushed the cup away from him. She turned and walked back to her position on the floor, kneeling demurely once again.

"I'm very sorry, Yoshi-san," she said, not feeling in the least bit apologetic. She removed the cup from in front of him. The tea, she noticed, was still steaming. "Perhaps the water was not hot enough. It is my fault. Perhaps some sake? . . ."

The fierce dragon's wooden eyes stared at her from the corner of the room, and the *No* actor wore a simple black hood over his head. If he had carried himself with better pride, she might have bent her thoughts enough to think he might resemble a *ninja*, feared killer, merciless. But his misshapen head looked more like a sack of knobby potatoes, and even his eyes were concealed behind a fine mesh.

She knew what was under the mask. Only she and Kiochi had ever seen his true face. Kiochi worshipped the great actor, hoping one day Yoshi would consent to become his teacher, and this hope made him blind and loyally mute. But he was too young. She had been with Yoshi since the end of the war in '48, when she had been a young orphaned child and he had yet to become a legend. She knew Yoshi, deeper than his skin, deeper than his heart. They understood each other, to a depth that Kiochi would never realize.

For a fleeting moment, she could see him as she first saw him: a tall, gaunt figure in black striding through the dust and filth of the Nagoya camp with smiling, bowing Japanese guards in tow. The blind mesh over his eyes had swiveled back and forth, searching, staring at the silent, suspicious prisoners. She remembered the gut-shriveling terror as that strange veiled gaze fastened on her and a long, black-sheathed finger singled her out.

"That one," the flat voice had said in the Japanese she had just begun to understand. It had taken two guards to chase her down as she bolted, dodging past skeletal legs and squat barracks walls. They dragged her back to the stranger, her arms bound painfully tight behind her back. One of the Japanese guards had lifted up the ragged, dirty shift she wore to show the stranger her six-year-old hairless sex. Furious rather than embarrassed,

she'd managed to twist in his grasp and bite down on his hand. With a yelp and a curse, the guard had punched her hard in the face, knocking her to the ground while the black stranger laughed, an eerie quavering sound.

Half-stunned, she heard him say, "Good, good," before he stooped down beside her, folding up like an organic origami, and stroked her matted hair. Then he picked her up under one arm and walked away, tears smearing her last sight of Nagoya as she shivered in pain and animal fear.

But that had been long ago, and it took no effort at all to push the image out of her mind. She sat back on her heels, knowing her face was as blank and serene as a No mask.

Kiochi hovered nervously, and Yoshi brushed him away as the slender, dark boy attempted to remove the master's heavy outer costume. "Get out," Yoshi ordered rudely.

Kiochi froze, staring at her for a moment, his eyes glistening with tears. He was only fourteen, a boy awkwardly becoming a man, a talented and sensitive novice with dedicated dreams. Then he bowed stiffly and fled the room.

Yoshi leaned over the low carved table, seemingly tired, his now hunchbacked shoulders drooping.

"He was not tired, she knew well.

"Sake . . . yes," Yoshi said. The querulous tone had not completely vanished from his voice, but he was subdued. She breathed an inward sigh of relief, and went to the small cabinet that held the sake.

"If it weren't always the same, play after play," Yoshi muttered. "If only people wanted something *new*, or perhaps even a little different." He was not addressing her, and expected no reply.

But she found herself answering anyway. "People of Tokyo have long memories, Yoshi-san." Her voice was small and very sad.

The strip of black mesh swiveled to center on her. "What has that to do with anything, you stupid woman?"

Yoshi always insulted her. Being insulted was better than suffering the physical pain his violent temper sometimes sparked, but she could not shrug off the words. The insults hurt her, just a tiny bit, like the bite of a small insect crying out to be scratched.

But it took little will any more to ignore the sting. She'd had a great deal of practice bearing insults and the occasional beatings from Yoshi over the years she'd spent with him. And she understood that his rage and pain was not directed at her, even while she bore the brunt of it.

"The old tales are comforting, Yoshi-san. No unites the people with an enduring past. The strange and the new . . ." She paused as she poured the warmed sake out into the ceramic cup set before him, and leaned back on her heels, looking straight at him with unashamed blue eyes. ". . . these are but curiosities. Toys to be played with and discarded. Soon, another novelty takes their place, passing things with no life, like dead leaves in the wind." She paused, watching him sitting very still, no longer hunchbacked. "Perhaps the old tales are the best, Yoshi-san."

He slipped the cup under the knobby black hood, and she heard him slurping the liquid noisily. Finally, she dropped her gaze, waiting patiently, marking the time with the sound of whispering traffic. A street vendor called out in shrill sharp tones, *fresh fish, fresh fish*. The sound seemed to float into the air, trickling through a window somewhere outside the room.

"No," Yoshi said, and set the empty cup down on the table. She promptly refilled it. "It is not the natural way. All things must be recreated anew, or they stagnate and become extinct."

He was so frustrated, she knew. He often spoke of leaving Tokyo, abandoning his position as the theatre's star No player. But he had made himself a minor legend throughout the Islands now, too steeped in his self-made traditions to so easily walk away from them. People paid to see the myths, preserved, flawless. But the man dreamed.

Dreamed of writing new No plays, dreamed of touring Japan, perhaps even the islands of the Pacific and the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Annexes. He'd even spoken, once or twice, of exporting his art to the barbarians of the Western world: Europe, maybe, or perhaps even in America, where there was still a small Japanese population homesick for their own cultural heritage.

But they were only dreams, and Tomiko knew he would never leave Tokyo. It was only here that his face could remain hidden behind the No masks, with the worshipful too polite to probe his secrets. Only behind the eternal shield of a changeless art could he be safe.

"More sake," Yoshi ordered brusquely. Expressionless, she poured the last of the warmed alcohol into his glass. A strand of blonde hair escaped her elaborate hairdressing, drifting across her vision. She could feel Yoshi staring at her.

"You're sneaking off again to see that worthless *baka* Isao again, eh?" he said, spitting out the curse word with utter contempt. "Your wanton behavior shames me."

She didn't answer. For a moment, she thought he might slap her, or scream his way into a real rage. It would almost be welcome. Legend or no, in many ways he tried to be like any other stereotypical Japanese man. He would find a reasonable excuse, and he would beat her. She would weep copiously and cower under the blows and mollify him as she was expected to. The next day he would bring her a new silk robe, or perhaps a beautiful jeweled hairpin, and sit stiffly unrepentant while she told him how good he was to her. They both recognized it was all a formality, only hollow social roles they both accepted without question. There was nothing personal in any of it. In some ways, she was as fine an actor as he.

"You get out, too," he said finally. She thought she heard a hint of sadness in his voice. Bowing respectfully, she rose gracefully and walked with short steps from the room. Once outside, she shivered, feeling all of her carefully cultivated peace fleeing from her like small winged insects before the wind of the storm.

Yoshi would drink himself into a catatonic stupor within an hour, as he did every night, and he would

have no need of her until the early morning. She hurried past the pedestrians on the city streets, her eyes downcast more to avoid the rude stares of the curious than out of any sense of modesty.

The Japanese had already begun to carefully steer away from the Axis powers after the Japanese defeated the Allies at Coral Sea. The Germans had always needed Japan more than she had needed the fascists, and the high-handed and contemptuous attitude of the German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop had done nothing but increase the distance between the two powers. By the time Japan had secured her dominance in Southeast Asia after the assassination of Mountbatten, the Nazis had already begun their suicidal attack on both Russia and the United States.

Japan avoided the fate of the defeated Nazis, fighting the tired Americans and British to a slow and costly standstill. The Treaty of Saipan with the Allies had created an oceanic territorial barrier between the barbaric United States and Japanese-held Asia and the Pacific. But for all its "Asia for Asians" sentiments and nationalistic fervor, the war had not diminished the intense curiosity of the Japanese people, and their centuries-long fascination for all things Western.

Tomiko had lived in the Island Empire most of her life, her childhood in the Moluccas a dim memory, but it was impossible for her to mask her pale Flemish heritage. Few Caucasians lived in Japan, and these were mostly women, either desperately aging mistresses acquired by war heroes or younger European refugees fleeing crushing economic depression, less refined caricatures of *geishas* catering to those with more exotic, and sometimes brutal, tastes.

As she hurried along the busy Ginza street, neon signs stained the wet pavement with garish colors in the dwindling twilight. She was all too aware of the strange juxtaposition. Clutching the rich silk cloth of her kimono close to her brocaded obi sash, she stepped carefully through the mud-splashed streets on platformed wooden zori clogs to avoid dirtying her immaculate white tabi socks. Harried Japanese businessmen brushed by her with leather briefcases, their Western-style silk ties escaping from their three-piece English wool suits.

It made her uncomfortable, the startled open stares of strange men, the hints of smiles that had changed in character as she had grown from a small neuter child into a woman. *I am not one of them, she thought angrily. I am no profiteering foreign whore, no false samurai's kept woman. This is my home, I am Japanese. Japanese, Japanese.* . . .

Traces of the firestorms that had erased huge parts of Tokyo were still evident on the walls of old buildings in the lower district of Shitamachi. Blackened scars and heat fissures on the remaining stones hinted at the malevolent devastation that swept Tokyo during the War. Once sleepy-eyed, fat Sumo wrestlers with their sleek, oiled topknots had ambled these narrow streets on their way to gymnasiums, jostling past the arrogant artisans and bustling, prosperous merchants who lived

in the flat expanse of wooden houses. Now it was angular glass and steel high-rises that elbowed one another as they thrust their way up through the few stubborn wood-and-mortar tenement houses that remained.

In Sendagi, on the northern outskirts of Shitamachi, Tomiko could see the yellow glow of lamplight in the upstairs window of one of these old wooden buildings. Isao's battered bicycle leaned against the railing next to the porch. Her heart always beat faster when she left to meet Isao—out of fear, or perhaps anticipation. It was half pleasurable, half intolerable, and she hesitated beside the bicycle, letting her fingers slide along its chipped metal frame, chill in the early evening air.

She liked this old house, its carved eaves faintly echoing the curved steeples of temples, the smell of warm smoke and faint tang of cooking odors captured in its paper screened windows. It belonged to Isao's great-uncle, and had been in Isao's family for as long as the family could remember.

The great-uncle was a rich and powerful member of one of Japan's largest banking trusts, and was often absent, off on business in Paris or London or Copenhagen, buying perfume companies, or woolen mills, selling influence. Isao was a younger relative, and as a non-inheriting son of the family, he would never live in the small house standing in the shadows of massive, featureless monoliths. But it pleased his tradition-loving great-uncle that Isao seemed to take such an interest in preserving the old family house, fending off the leagues of *jiageya*, unscrupulous developers hungry for land in crowded Tokyo. If he knew Isao met his *gaijin* lover in the home of his ancestors, Tomiko doubted very much if the great-uncle would have approved.

She kicked off her zori, grateful to escape barefoot into the house. Outside, the press of strangers and the thickness in the air made her feel unclean, uneasy. Here she was with Isao, and here she could safely indulge her dreams, even if just a little.

Tomiko rarely dreamed of her parents any more. Nagoya had been something that faded little by little over the years, until it was no more than a story seen on a bad television screen—faint, confusing, and uninteresting. When she was awake, surrounded by a sea of familiar, dark faces, narrow eyes above flattened cheeks, she could not quite bring her parents' faces into focus in her mind. Even in a mirror, her own face seemed shockingly absurd.

She'd even attempted to dye her hair black not long after Yoshi had brought her to Tokyo. The dye had dribbled onto her face, stained her skin, streaked her shoulders with greasy lines. Furious, Yoshi had beat her before he shaved her head.

Her hair had not been cut since then, and it fell in thick, golden waves down her back when she brushed it at night. But when she dreamed, it was always black, her eyes were dark and almond-shaped, and she was always tiny, smaller than Kiochi, small and Japanese.

This night, as she slept next to Isao in the great-uncle's small house, she dreamed. In her dream, she walked

along the crowded Tokyo streets, hurrying to meet Isao in the small Shinto garden where they often met. She was anonymous, like any other happy and confident Japanese girl. No one stared at her with rude bemusement. How pleased Isao would be to see her, with her true face, her true skin.

On the street in front of her, two tall people walked slowly, their backs to her. Suddenly afraid, she tried to turn away, but the press of the crowd prevented her. A man and a woman, blonde head and shoulders above the dark-haired multitude around them, started to turn around and look back. *No, no*, she thought, and felt her bones within her growing larger, pushing against her skin. *Don't look at me*

They were pale, sick, with gaunt cheeks sucked in under sad blue eyes. They didn't smile as they reached out empty arms toward her. She could feel the beautiful black sheen of her hair being stripped away, leaving the terrible yellow behind. Tears pushed their way out of her eyes, leaking down her cheeks in dark-stained lines as the color washed out. She was overwhelmed with sadness, and shaking with anger. *Stop!*

People in the street stared and pulled away from them, whispering. Behind them, the Tokyo skyline wavered and vanished. She could see the camp at Nagoya, the barbed wire. She could smell the dust and unwashed bodies, the disease and the fear. Her parents stood watching her wordlessly.

To her horror, the man's hands went to his face, fumbling for a moment as he pulled the cadaverous mask away, revealing Yoshi's knobby black head. Then the woman's face also fell away, and Kiuchi grinned at her, a pale mass of yellow hair in his hands.

"Good, eh?" he said, cheerfully.

She reached up, fingernails raking her face, searching for the edge of the hated mask. But she couldn't find it, instead yanking thick handfuls of blonde hair painfully out of her scalp.

"Stop that!" Yoshi ordered, and struck her. A cloud-burst splattered huge wet drops of rain onto the dusty ground, thunder echoing in Yoshi's bellowing. She fell on her knees, scratching at herself in desperation as he beat her, shouting wordlessly at her.

She began to sob, and woke to find her pillow damp with tears, her hands tangled in her hair. Outside, thunder rumbled through the stands of high-rises, echoing off their blind glass faces as rain fell gently against the wooden eaves of the old house. Isao slept beside her, snoring faintly, his arm curved around her waist.

"Mama," she whispered. "Papa." But their faces had already faded from her mind.

She left Isao before the sun rose. There was barely enough pastel blue light in the early morning sky to see by as she rode the train into the city. The few sleepy-eyed wage-workers heading for their mops and street-rooms and piles of dirty restaurant dishes barely glanced at her as they nodded off in rhythm with the train. She ignored the open stare of a single young salaryman, his hair cut fashionably long. He was holding his shiny new

briefcase awkwardly on the knees of his new suit. No doubt dreaming, she thought sourly, of the time to come when he could afford an exotic blonde *gaijin* mistress.

Yoshi had frozen into his catatonia with the sake cup held six inches from the low table. Ancient books and papers of past *No* masters lay scattered around him where he had tossed them after memorizing their contents. She gathered them together gently, appalled by Yoshi's careless negligence. The spirit of his dead patron and adoptive father, the renowned and respected Sakyo Gorosuke, must be wailing with despair, she thought. She pried the small cup out of his stiff fingers, then opened the wooden chest of bedclothes, pulling out a dozen thick quilts. Taking the empty sake containers, she left to wake Kiuchi and prepare breakfast.

She could hear the faint sound of stamping feet and chanting voices as the other members of the company rehearsed portions of the plays they would present at the next monthly performance. Inside, Yoshi would be just now beginning to shiver, wrapped in the layers of quilts Tomiko had placed around his shoulders.

"Nobuyuki-san has offered to take me on as his apprentice," Kiuchi told her. The boy always came to the theatre early for breakfast and they sat together, eating on the wooden porch that overlooked the garden behind the theatre. Her eyes followed the trails left in the sand surrounding the miniature islands—curving lines like the ocean waves they represented. The white, clean sand was almost too bright for her eyes.

"How fortunate for you," she said distractedly. "Nobuyuki-san is very talented."

Kiuchi squinted at her quizzically. "Not as talented as Yoshi-san," he grumbled. When she didn't answer, he added, "Don't you think Yoshi is the best *No* actor who ever lived?"

His youthful exuberance made her smile and brought her attention back to the boy sitting across the low table from her. "I don't know," she said, truthfully. "I haven't lived forever."

"Well . . ." Kiuchi speared one of the little fish in the tray with his hashi stick and gestured at her with it. "He's the best actor who is alive now. That's what I think." He popped the fish in his mouth and chewed rapidly. He glanced at her bowl, which she had not touched. "Aren't you hungry?"

"No," she said, and pushed the bowl away. "Please, help yourself."

Unself-consciously, the boy gobbled the remaining food. "You've been acting very strange this past week," he said, talking around the rice in his mouth. The next moment, his mind was again on himself and his problems. "What do I have to do for Yoshi-san to teach me?"

"Why ask me?"

"You've been with him longer than anyone," Kiuchi said, unable to hide the longing in his voice, jealous of her close position with Yoshi. He blurted out, "Some people even believe you're lovers, you know."

She smiled as his face reddened. "I'm sure they do," she said quietly, unoffended. "What else would I be?" They both knew how impossible that was.

He dropped his gaze from hers and stopped eating. "You know that's not what I meant." He grumbled. It was as close to apologizing as he could get.

"No, of course not," she said tiredly.

After a moment, Kiuchi nodded stiffly and finished her remaining rice. "You've seen me in Nobuyuki-san's classes," he continued. "I'm good, you know. I'm one of his best students. I *am* his best student!"

Behind his boasting, she could hear his insecurity and self-doubt. "Nobuyuki-san is a talented actor and a fine teacher. Also, great as Yoshi-san might be, Nobuyuki is the real headmaster here. He can do much for your future," she said. "There are many who will envy you."

His proud facade crumbled after a moment. "Can't you talk to Yoshi-san for me? He listens to you, you know. He's seen me at practice classes, and I *am* good."

She shook her head slightly, smiling apologetically.

"Why?" Kiuchi cried out in frustration, turning away from her with his knees drawn up to his chest. Tears hovered at the edges of his eyes and he thrust out his jaw, trying to hide his feelings. "Why won't he teach me?"

"Yoshi-san will not teach anyone, Kiuchi. There is no personal slight intended." She shrugged. "He cannot bear to be too close to others. You know that."

"Then why can't he teach just me? I *am* already his *koben*. He trusts me . . . doesn't he?" He had picked up some pebbles from the rock garden, and now tossed one toward the tiny green island nearest them. She winced as it struck, marring the clean lines of the raked garden. Kiuchi glanced at her and threw another.

"Yoshi needs you," Tomiko said, trying to reassure him. "He has to trust you."

Kiuchi tossed another pebble, this one bouncing off the miniature pine tree on the island, the needles shaking in protest. "If he won't take me as his apprentice, I'll leave him," Kiuchi muttered. "I won't be his *koben* any more. I'll go to another school and find another teacher, better than him."

She laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. "No, you won't," she said.

"I will!"

"Where will you go? You are assistant to the greatest *No* actor alive. Nobuyuki-san has offered you an enviable position in the company. You will stay here, not just because it is the only place, but because it is the *best* place for you to be."

Kiuchi let the remaining rocks dribble from his hands. "Why do you stay, then, Tomiko?" he said quietly.

The words went straight to her unguarded heart. She knew what he was asking. She lowered her eyes and straightened the folds of her kimono with steady hands to hide her confusion.

She felt a sense of duty to Yoshi. He had rescued her from misery, brought her to the islands and given her a place to belong. For all his posturing and violence, he needed her. She was as much his guardian as his servant.

But without Yoshi, where could she go? Become another bargirl in the "water trade"? Or, worse, be forced to seek employment in the Yoshiwara red-light district? She shuddered.

Being with Yoshi gave her status as well as protection. Surrounded by elegance, schooled in aristocratic arts, it gave her her hopes, her dreams. She stayed because it was the only place for her to be.

"Because it is also the best place for me to be," she said finally.

Kiuchi shook his head.

She didn't believe her own words either.

Inside, Yoshi began to wail—a thin, weirdly quavering cry of icy sadness and rage. Kiuchi grinned wickedly, his good humor returning. "Ah," he said. "The master is with us once more."

The theatre had prospered since the end of the War, with the Japanese government vigorously promoting all of its classical arts. While it was still necessary for some of the actors to take on students or teach classes at the University to supplement their salaries, the company itself could be quite selective as to the performances for private sponsors. Tonight, they were to perform for the second largest PR firm in Tokyo, celebrating a new branch opening in Osaka with a two-play selection and a single *kyogen* intermission. Busy executives wouldn't have time for the traditional complete five-play program.

Her fan had been placed on a seat along the aisle, and she slipped into her reserved place as soon as the lights were dimmed. Beside her, a patron glanced at her curiously, then resumed rustling the rice-paper pages of his hand-bound book. Although the language of *No* was medieval and often obscure even in Japanese, she knew all the stories by heart, and needed no translations. Backstage, in his private green room, she knew Yoshi would be sitting on his small stool, staring at his reflection in the mirror as Kiuchi hovered anxiously nearby. The other actors in the company prepared themselves in the mirror-room near the stage, waiting for Yoshi.

The musicians played a short piece, hidden backstage, alerting both the patrons and the players that it was nearly time. A stage assistant, dressed in black, silently erected a bamboo *torii* on the stage in front of the great painting of the pine tree, the stage's only other decoration. He unfolded brushwood twigs on either side of the shrine, suggesting a fence. Tomiko let herself relax; in her practiced eyes, the assistant disappeared and the gossipy hushed voices of latecomers hurrying to their seats were silenced. She had been watching *No* since she had first been brought to Tokyo by Yoshi, and it was easy to make the rudeness and the everyday reality blur away.

The musicians and the chorus took their places and the play began. Nobuyuki Yahiro, one of the company's oldest and best *No* actors, made his elegantly slow entrance onto the brilliantly polished stage. He began the dance to open the play.

"I am a wandering priest . . ." he sang, and she believed him, Nobuyuki slowly vanishing as the mask came alive. She let herself feel the past and the art as it came together as one living whole.

The traditional *bayashi* orchestra began, the rhythmic *issei* melody filled with pain and grief. Yoshi, wear-

ing the fukai mask of the beautiful Lady Miyasudokoro, appeared at the top of the long runway leading to the stage. The rustling and whispers died away as Yoshi glided like a ghost, his every movement subtle, perfect.

There never had been anyone as great as Yoshi. Not a hint of his eccentric private life, his carelessness, his drinking bouts or his violent temper marred his performance. On stage, his absolute concentration was palpable. Every movement, every graceful nuance, every still pose, was polished and flawlessly controlled. Yoshi *was* Miyasudokoro.

"I am sure you are no ordinary woman," the itinerant priest sang, the chorus giving the words grace and color. "Please tell me your name."

Miyasudokoro turned her head, very slightly, exquisite grief in the simple gesture of her hand before her eyes. Tomiko experienced her pain, feeling with her heart. "Revealing my name would serve no purpose," Miyasudokoro sang, Yoshi's voice infinitely delicate with a thousand shades. "... But for now say a prayer for one nameless and not of this world."

She watched him dance, felt the movement of his body, never doubted for a moment that he was the sad, beautiful ghost of a lost Lady. As the play finished, she sat with the audience, appreciating the timeless work in silence as Yoshi slowly retreated along the long runway off the stage, vanishing like the ghost he played.

The *kyogen* actors began their humorous interlude between plays, and the mood changed. Tomiko rose, quietly walking up the aisle to the exit as the broad antics of the *kyogen* players brought smiles, even a subdued chuckle here and there among the celebrating executives. But Tomiko had seen enough.

Isao waited for her at the bridge. In the distance, the *torii* gates to the small Shinto shrine looked as if they had been cut out of the night and pasted against the liquid colors of the evening sunset.

"I'm so sorry, Isao-san," Tomiko said, slightly out of breath. "I didn't realize I was so late."

He threw the last of the rice cake he had been feeding to the koi into the water. The water swirled underneath the bridge in agitation as he turned to her and smiled.

"No, Tomiko," he said, his eyes shining with tears, his smile trembling slightly. "I am the one who is too early."

Her heart sank in dread. Even as he gently led up to it, she knew her lover, her last hope of a happy future, was destroying her dreams.

He didn't take long with his news. He had been promoted to the rank of section chief in his company. His employers had spoken privately with his family. An ambitious company executive needed a proper wife, and it was long past time, his parents had agreed, that he should be married. They had arranged for him to meet the girl the families had agreed would be a suitable bride. Her name was Yaeko; she was the youngest daughter of one of the company's directors. In addition to her family connections, she was very pretty and sweet-tempered.

She was also very Japanese.

But this was the modern world, after all, and he could have declined the match, he said. It was a medieval anachronism, almost offensive in this day and age, to have one's bride chosen. He nearly did refuse. So he said. He shrugged then, and she knew all of the reasons he could not have declined, modern age or not.

She stared across the shimmering water, not daring to look at him, watching the clouds in the sunset as they bled into a deepening vermillion.

"But now that I am a section chief," he went on, "there is no reason for you to worry."

She closed her eyes, knowing what he would say, word for word. He would be able to afford both a wife and a mistress on his salary as section chief. She understood Yaeko would make no trouble. After all, a businessman's success was often measured by the beauty of his mistress as well as the suitability of his wife. Besides, she knew without saying it, an exotic *gaijin* lover was no threat to a dutiful Japanese wife, as long as they were discreet.

She could leave Yoshi. Isao would buy her a small apartment in Tokyo, which would be exchanged for a larger one, of course, when he became a director, someday soon perhaps. But in the meantime, there was no reason they couldn't go on as before. Yaeko was all very well, but it was Tomiko he adored. He promised her love. He promised her fine furniture for her own apartment. He promised to buy her beautiful clothes and expensive jewelry.

He promised everything except security. Everything except respect and the social acceptance she craved. He promised her nothing.

She took a small piece of paper from her sleeve, and handed it to him. "It is an old poem," she said shakily as he unfolded it. "I can't write proper poetry. I only changed one word."

In her small, childish calligraphy, she had written:
Nagakaramu (Will he love me always?)
Kokoro mo shirazu (I cannot read his heart.)
Kikokami no (As tangled as my blonde hair)
Midarete kesa wa (Are my thoughts)
Monou uo koso omoie (This morning.)

He understood, and slowly nodded. He folded the poem carefully and handed it back to her as a tear slid down her face.

"It is a beautiful poem, Tomiko. I will always love you."

She held the paper in her hand, watching him as he walked away, stiff-spined and slender, his black hair glistening in the waning light. He didn't look back.

How could she have been so stupid, so foolish as to let herself believe she could make him love her enough to defy tradition, defy his parents' wishes, defy even common sense to marry a yellow-haired *gaijin*? How could she have convinced herself that somehow she could *make* herself acceptable? She knew she was beautiful, and her exotic looks made her sought after. But only as a lover. A status symbol. Never as a respectable wife. Certainly not as the mother of half-breed children. Her fist curled around the poem, crumpling it angrily into a ball.

The paper dropped from her hand and she watched it as the breeze lifted it up. The breeze slackened, and it fell into the water. A curious koi rose toward it, then rejected it with a flick of satiny white and gold tail. She smiled bitterly as she noticed the direction it floated, ink smearing as the water darkened the paper: northeast, toward the *Kimon*, the Demon's Gate. Of course.

It was her fate, her bad luck.

Something inside her quieted. The small child who had grown up Japanese, but who could never be Japanese, and never be anything else, stopped crying.

Yoshi was in even more foul a mood than usual after another night of drunken stupor, screaming for his breakfast now that his violent trembling had ended. She slid the fusuma screen back and set the tray of misoshiru beanpaste and pickled tsukemono vegetables with steaming tea inside the small room. As she slipped past him to roll up the futon and the rumpled quilts, he slapped her roughly. The force of the blow threw her off balance, and she fell to her knees.

"You are slow with everything," he snarled from behind the black mask. "It comes from too many nights sneaking off to screw your lover. You have a duty to me, you ungrateful ugly slut."

She got to her feet silently, her face stinging from the blow. Yoshi crawled to the tray and slurped the tea noisily, eyeing her. His misshapen arm gestured at her. "Well? Have you nothing to say?" he demanded. He wanted an argument, an excuse to let his anger build so that he could give her a real beating. It had been some time since the last explosion.

She should have played her part, made the tears flow, fallen to the floor and wallowed her way through another of his rages. Perhaps it might have made them both feel better later. But the strange hard bubble that had stuck in her chest the night Isao had left her standing alone at the shrine rose up in her throat and broke.

"I also have a duty to my parents, Yoshi-san." She heard the calm words as if someone else spoke them.

Yoshi held his teacup halfway to his mouth, regarding her from behind the black mask. Finally he said, "Your parents, Tomiko, died in a Nagoya prison camp years ago." His tone was baffled.

"True," she agreed. "And I recognize my duty to you, Yoshi-san. I will always be grateful to you for rescuing me from that terrible prison when I was a child. I am honored to have had such a benevolent protector during the War, and an excellent employer in the long years since." Her words were flat, and totally emotionless. She bowed to him, deeply, blonde hair obscuring her blue eyes. When she straightened, Yoshi still sat with his cup suspended in midair.

"But I must leave you now. My apologies," she said quietly.

"No," he said, and brought the cup down on the tray sharply, tea jostling out onto the smooth lacquered surface. "You will not go. I forbid it." His voice became shrill, oddly slurred.

"I am sorry, Yoshi-san," she said. Only a few minutes

before she had not even known herself that she was leaving him. The decision seemed to come as if sent from some divine messenger. But once it was made, she knew she would not, could not change her mind.

"I am an important man, well known and respected in Tokyo!" he screeched, and his body rose slightly from the tatami-covered floor, bending strangely, trembling. "You are nothing, a scrubby little snot I pulled out of the shit-lined gutter! A foreign whore I bought for pocket change! The police will bring you back, Tomiko. You will not leave me!"

"I do not think, Yoshi-san," she said, very quietly, "that you wish me to tell the police about you."

A quiet grew between them, like the silence that falls over a waiting serpent staring into the eyes of its prey. But who was which? she wondered.

"No," Yoshi said finally, defeated, sinking back onto the floor. "Tomiko, I'm sorry. I didn't mean those terrible words. Please . . . don't leave me, I . . . I need you."

She felt pity, and knew he had meant her to. It was part of the old role, the one she knew she would never play again. She knelt on the tatami mat in front of him and reached for his black mask. Flinching in surprise, he pulled away.

"Tomiko . . ." he said, almost pleading.

She hesitated, staring at him, and reached for the mask again. This time he allowed the black mesh to be peeled slowly away.

The face behind the mask was not Japanese.

It was not even human.

Four orange-flecked iridescent eyes stared at her, set deeply into a bone structure that could never have been mistaken for anything vaguely human. Scissored mouthpieces fit together in ragged edges, while a pair of black scaled tubular tongues flitted from nostril-like pits on either side.

Yoshi turned his head away, as if ashamed to be seen, his thin, corded neck moving with serpentine grace. Bronze short featherlike fur covered his skin in rippling patterns of iridescence.

"You don't need me any more, Yoshi-san," she said gently. "Perhaps it is time for you to take on students. There are many who would be greatly honored to study under you."

His nostrils quivered as he spoke, black tongues flickering; a perfect human voice came from his alien face. "No one can study under me, Tomiko. I can never reveal who I am . . . *what* I am."

"Then teach only Kiuchi. He has seen your true face. He doesn't care. His eyes see only the greatest living No actor in the world."

"Impossible, impossible," he muttered. "Only you, I can trust only you. . . ."

"I truly am sorry, Yoshi-san," she said firmly, and stood to go.

"Wait," he said as she reached the fusuma doors. "I, too, am sorry, Tomiko. You must understand." He stood up, wavering slightly. Warily, she stepped away from him, eyes narrowed.

He laughed—a sad, weird sound—and began to strip

off the gloves that bound his hands into human shape. Seven long fingers writhed from their uncomfortable restraints, bending fluidly, impossibly. "If I had never come to this world, to these Islands, Tomiko; if it had not been for me, your life might have been so very different."

His elaborate silk robes peeled away, falling one by one to the floor. "I thought I could change things, little things, tweak time just a fraction, who would know? A misplaced file here, a dead telephone line there. Nothing overt. The accumulations of tiny discreet mistakes over the years that could turn the tide of the War. I didn't want power for myself. My motives were pure, unselfish. I thought of myself as an unknown savior, bringing peace to a young and foolish world."

He stood naked finally, his oddly jointed sexless body moving in a weird counterpoint with his words, his voice carrying all the training of a master. Infinite sadness.

"And the final touch . . . I was so proud of myself. There were only six in the entire world. They could have made more, were making more, but it would take time. Time they couldn't afford now. Maybe before my little . . . diversions . . ." He laughed, the sound wrenching. "They loaded them all on a single ship bound to a tiny nameless atoll in the Pacific. No escort, no sailing orders. Not even the crew knew what they carried, or where their deadly cargo was destined."

Tomiko circled away from him, as he undulated in some strange *No* dance only he knew, his voice rich as it took on a chanting rhythm, his perfect muscles rippling under his skin. It made no sense to her, but she was riveted to his alien performance.

"The ship would have been sunk anyway. It would have been just as easy for the submarine to have found her before she reached the atoll instead of after. Then the breath of the dragon would have been sealed. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps eventually millions would live who would have otherwise died in senseless agony. No *Enola Gay*. No Hiroshima. No Nagasaki. Such a simple small change; what would it hurt? It didn't really matter that much which side won or lost. Ideologies are always irrelevant, ultimately. After years of tiny adjustments, peace was assured anyway; why not chain the dragon before he was loosed on the world?"

His voice caught, an alien vibration that split his words into disharmonic layers, spinning and humming through the small room. "What was so wrong in giving another people, *your* people, time to understand the terrible power they held in their childish hands? Time to tame the dragon. Time to grow beyond hate and fear and war. *That* was what was truly important . . . wasn't it?"

He stopped, twisted, staring at her. Her heart hammered in her throat. She couldn't read his expression, but she could hear the pain and despair in his distorted voice. "But *my* people said it was a crime to tamper with this history, with this future. We had learned how to change time, repair the damage we'd done to ourselves, as your people might someday. But we weren't gods. This was not our world, not our people. It didn't belong to us, they said. It wasn't for us . . . for *me* to judge you. I had abused my power. I had stolen your rights, a terrible thing.

"It was decided that I would be punished. I was condemned to live the rest of my life in the world I changed, this world, your world, Tomiko. I have learned . . ." His voice broke, and he sank slowly to the tatami mat, limbs folding up under him like a child's broken toy. ". . . but I cannot be forgiven. And yet I still believe . . . I was right . . . I was right . . ." He fell silent, unmoving as stone.

"Yoshi-san," she said, her voice painful with emotion, "I don't understand."

He didn't seem to hear her. "So, I became simply 'Yoshi,' the adopted son of the new Island Empire I helped to create. Now I am the famous *No* star, eccentric fabled war hero doomed to chant and dance the ancient tales of death and duty from behind my masks, unchanged and unchanging. Never to meddle again, never to change. Never."

He turned his alien face toward her. "After my . . . father died, I was lonely, Tomiko. I was afraid and angry, and there was no one. I thought I could choose a companion out of the wreckage. Someone who would know how it is to live in an alien world, and not be able to blend in seamlessly with it, to truly belong. Someone who had alien skin . . . like me . . ."

"But I'm not like you at all, Yoshi-san!" she said. "You've hidden your true face away from the world, invented the lies to explain your strange behavior. I've known what you are, but even my eyes don't see that face any more." She crouched beside him and touched him gently on his shoulder, feeling the softness of his skin, the hard powerful muscles underneath. "You try and flaunt traditions, customs, and then in the next moment, you're just like everyone else. You've mimicked us for so long, you believe your own lies; we all do. We see what you want us to see. No one, not even I, doubts that you are a man, a great Japanese man."

His orange-flecked eyes stared at her unblinkingly. "But I have never been able to hide what I am, no matter how hard I tried," she said. "I don't have your great ability. And although I am dutiful and work very hard, no one has ever mistaken me for Japanese"—she swallowed, blinking away sudden tears—"except me."

He sat as still as if he were in one of his catatonic states, like some odd carved statue of a demon. Without his mask, she realized, it was hard for her to read his expression. "But I cannot stay with you. I cannot help you any more."

His head swiveled toward her, and after a moment he spoke. "Where will you go?" he asked forlornly.

She hadn't thought about it, but it was obvious. "To Holland. I must have family left somewhere. I'll find them."

"How will you live there?" he said, his voice tired as he rose and stooped to retrieve his robes. "Do you even remember how to speak Dutch? You will never be accepted there any more than you are here."

For a moment, Tomiko could see the blurry face of her mother, thin and pale, her light blue eyes haunted. Sounds, words that seemed as if she should know their meaning, echoed in her memory.

"I know my name," she said. "My name is Thomasina

Erika Van Boech," she said in Dutch. She parroted the words she had learned by rote as a child, repeatedly coached by her frightened, dying mother. "I live at 17 Nieuwe Amstelstraat in Djakarta." Words and identities that once seemed vital in the dusty, Nagoya camp. "My papa works for the Batavia Trading Company." Her supply of half-remembered Dutch was exhausted.

"Go, then. Go home, if you can find it. Leave now," Yoshi said, resigned, and pulled his mask back across his face.

"Things can still change, Yoshi-san," she said, reluctant to leave now that her freedom was assured. "What does it matter now, these lost letters or missed messages? Is it important any more when some forgotten ship sank? Can you go back and change what has happened, as you did before? Put it back together how it was?" She stood by the door, unable to walk out on him this way.

"No," he said. "I can change nothing now."

"Perhaps not the past," she said, "but what of the future?"

He remained silent, and after a moment she opened the fusuma doors, stepped outside and shut them gently behind her. He didn't call her back, and she found her knees were trembling as she walked away.

Tomiko took little with her when she left that evening, clothes and a few personal things that barely filled a single suitcase. She had waited until most of the company were at dinner, to avoid their stares and questions. But Kiochi had been waiting for her.

Kiochi insisted she stay with his sister in their tiny Tokyo apartment. Chiyo supported herself and paid for her younger brother's theatrical education on her modest salary as a hostess in a bar in Ginza, and Tomiko had felt uncomfortable at first. But Chiyo, as round-faced as her brother, and a little more than plump, had a bubbling laugh that had soon set Tomiko at ease.

"It's one thing to leave Yoshi," Chiyo said after a frustrating day for them both. Tomiko had spent most of another week filling out applications and trying to convince hostile officials to let her out of the country. "After all, it's not like you were married to him."

The two women sat up late with a large bottle of black-market Irish whiskey Kiochi had bought. He had long ago dozed off drunk, sprawled out on the floor and was snoring lightly while they talked.

"That . . . simply wasn't possible," Tomiko murmured. Chiyo waved the words away with a frown. "Yes, yes," she said impatiently. "Kiochi explained it all to me . . . his old war injuries. How horrible that must be for a man. Oh, don't look so sad."

The effort to keep from smiling must have made Tomiko look too serious. She stared down into the whiskey in her tiny porcelain cup to hide her amusement.

"All the same, I can't understand why you'd want to leave Tokyo," Chiyo was saying. "You are so lucky!"

Tomiko laughed, surprised, her cheeks a little numbed from the alcohol. "Lucky! How am I lucky?"

"If you worked with me at the bar, you would be a favorite, you know," Chiyo said. "Look at me! I like to

eat too much and I am too plain, but someone like you . . . You are not only beautiful, you are educated, refined as well! You could be rich!" Chiyo's voice held no envy, only admiration.

Tomiko shook her head ruefully. "But you're still young. Eventually you will marry someone respectable and have a real family. *You* are the lucky one."

Chiyo snorted, a definitely unwomanly sound. "What makes you think that's what I *want*? To marry some poor salaryman who spends half his time in bars like mine paying attention to other women? Have five or six children"—she laughed—"all boys, of course, to occupy the rest of my life? No, no!" Chiyo waved her teacup at Tomiko, the brown whiskey sloshing in its bottom. The whiskey had pulled down Chiyo's placid mask, left her feelings naked. Tomiko refilled the teacup. "I would rather be like you, beautiful and exotic, so that men would give me lots of presents and money, and I could find a very rich patron to set me up in my own business. And if I behaved badly, well, who cares? Blonde beautiful *gaijin* are expected to be wild and willful. But if I tried to be that way? . . ." Chiyo propped her plump cheek on one fist. "I'd just get fired."

"Maybe if you're very, very good," Kiochi mumbled suddenly, half-awake on the floor, his eyes still closed, "you can come back in the next life as a yellow-haired *gaijin*. . . ." He giggled, hiccuped abruptly and began snoring again.

Outside, the sky was an electric blue; even in the middle of the night, the bright lights of the city reflected on the thin clouds above. Yoshi, she thought, would be as drunk as they were by now. But there would be no one in the morning to take care of him.

Kiochi handed her a large envelope, a strangely blank expression on his face. "It's from Yoshi," he said, unwilling to look at her directly, "to help you 'negotiate' with the authorities."

Inside was a million yen. For a moment, she stared at the crisp new bills, not seeing them, not knowing what to think.

"Also, Yoshi-san says," Kiochi continued, "you will need money for the journey. He says he is not a generous man, please don't thank him. That, in return, you must come to the theatre for a special *belkhai* performance before you leave Tokyo."

After a long moment, she bowed deeply. "Please tell Yoshi-san I would be honored to attend."

Kiochi bowed stiffly, then grinned suddenly. "Yoshi has given me a part in one of the plays. We're both having good luck, eh?"

It took most of the million yen to expedite the arrangements for the journey, one petty official after another whittling away his share. But finally, it was all arranged. It would be a short train ride to Kobe in the morning, and she would be in the Netherlands within a week. But she found she did want to see Yoshi act one last time, in the *No* plays that she realized were part of her now.

It felt strange, being in Western-style clothing. As she

sat waiting in the darkened theater, her clothes seemed to bind to her body, hot and airless. Her long hair hung in a simple straight braid down her back. It was hard, with all the worries and nervous arrangements filling her mind, to relax as the performances began.

The *belokai* program had been selected by Nobuyuki as the acting headmaster of the theatre, but it seemed more of a showcase for Yoshi. He began with *Seitoba*, a stately play of exquisite simplicity. Yoshi glided onstage as the Queen, with Kiuchi behind him, the boy barely quivering behind his *tsure* attendant's mask. It was Kiuchi's first public performance, and only her awareness of her friend's private happiness and good fortune marred the perfection of the *No* illusion.

By the fourth play, several in the audience had come and gone, along with most of the day. Yoshi had chosen the theatrical *Dofoji* as a contrast to the simple elegance of *Seitoba*. The *kotsuzumi* drummer sang in rhythm with his pounding, weird, demented animal cries, bringing chills to Tomiko's skin.

In the role of the young dancer, Yoshi danced the hypnotic *rambyoshi*, his movements growing more intense and rapid as he worked his way across the stage to the great iron bell. With a final thunder of drums, he leapt into the bell, a dangerous feat as it crashed to the stage, trapping the actor inside.

She had expected it of Yoshi, but she gasped along with the rest of the audience when the huge bell was slowly lifted, without a trace of the actor beneath. As it reached the top of the high ceiling, Yoshi dropped swirling out of the bell to the stage below, masked now in the demon's guise, his changed brocaded silks billowing.

"Countless Dragon Kings of the three thousand worlds, have mercy, hear our prayers!" the chorus wailed.

She could understand the scattered applause after the fourth play had ended, spontaneous if a little improper, and let herself relax and enjoy the comic *kyogen* act.

The last play was to have been one of Tomiko's favorites. She had smiled when she saw the program, thinking it had been arranged as his private farewell gift to her. But, surprisingly, Yoshi appeared alone on the stage. He walked to the edge, not with the gliding slow steps of an actor. With his face concealed behind his black mask, he spoke as an ordinary man, not in the elegant, moving poetry of the familiar play.

"Tonight," he said, his voice carrying through the large house even though he spoke quietly, "the Motokiyo *No* Theatre will not present *Shokun*."

While around her a surprised buzz of concern agitated through the audience, Tomiko watched the way Yoshi stood, her familiarity with his movements helping her to see his pain. Perhaps it was the *No* that gave her ears to hear the fear and uncertainty in his voice, eyes to see his trembling, though these qualities were invisible to the people around her. He stood alone on the smooth bare stage, like a remote island swallowed up in its gleaming vastness. The program was more than a simple parting gift from him, she realized. Tears suddenly made her nose sting.

"Tonight, it is with humble pride I would like to pre-

sent for you the premiere performance of *Hachigatsu e Tomiko*, August and Tomiko, a new *No* play.

"The writing and performance of new plays for the *No* is not without precedent. Even the great Zeami warned centuries ago not to waste too much of our talent on maintaining useless traditions of the past. The spirit of *No* is in its eternal life, not in fossilizing it into brittle amber."

The noise increased in the theatre, several murmuring angrily. A few startled patrons rose from their seats, threatening to walk out. Yoshi hesitated, then spoke again as if nothing unusual were happening.

"New plays are being created and performed every year by other schools of *No*, and while it is the proud responsibility of the Motokiyo Theatre to preserve the noble works of our past, we also must strive to refine our living art with new interpretations."

Ignoring the commotion in the theatre, Yoshi pitched his voice to carry throughout the room, and continued. "I have written this play as my last public *No* performance. After this evening, I will retire to begin private teaching of the performance of *No*, and to write my own plays. It is my humblest hope that you will find this play worthy, and all those in the years to come."

A man who had been trying to squeeze past Tomiko stopped, his mouth open, and sat down in the seat that had been vacated beside her. "No," she heard him whisper to himself, blind to the blonde girl next to him, "not the last performance of *Gorotake*! Unthinkable!" Several other patrons seemed to feel the same, as the minor exodus faltered, and the audience quieted, half stunned, half curious.

Nobuyuki Yahiro appeared on the bare stage as the ghost of a beautiful young girl, shy and frightened, called back to the world by a lonely angry demon. "Alone, traveling from a far country, I wander through the thin mists drifting between the pines," Nobuyuki sang, his voice only slightly muffled behind his impenetrable mask, a sound that floated as detached and bodiless as the ghost he portrayed. He held his fan delicately as his feet glided slowly across the stage. "I heard the voice of the violent storm from behind the mountains, desolate and friendless. It is this sound which draws me to this place."

Then Yoshi appeared. For a wild moment, Tomiko thought he had appeared *shitamen*, maskless, his face naked. Underneath the demon's huge wig was a new mask, neither a demon nor lion nor God of Hell, but Yoshi's true features altered, shifted, carved from wood and made beautifully divine. "Like the storm-bringer brother of the Sun Goddess, banished am I to the land of darkness," Yoshi sang, dancing slowly, his feet stamping in deliberate steps. "There is no solace in my heart to dance in the autumn moonlight." Behind him, the flute wailed, eerie and ethereal.

On one side of the stage, the chorus knelt in two small impassive rows, chanting Yoshi's true story, his pain and fury, his loneliness and sorrow. Out of their tightly controlled faces came voices of dark beauty, weird shadowy sighs, like the wind through reeds.

"The breath of the dragon has been sealed. I have chained him before he was loosed on the world. It is a gift, a priceless jewel I stitched into your robes while you slept." Yoshi sang to the young ghost Nobuyuki played, despair in his voice. He held his hands before his face in sorrow. "You did not suspect its presence, yet I can never be forgiven for my trespass."

It was hard to tell how well Yoshi's play was being received; for all its abstract purity and reflections of ancient poetry, for all the elegance and beauty of the music, for all the subtle and delicate movement Yoshi's mastery of the dance commanded, it was still new and strange.

"To bring me here," the young ghost sang, "can only create greater unhappiness and grief. I belong to another world, and while I feel pity for you, I cannot stay with you. I must follow the autumn moon as it travels westward through the night sky, searching for Heaven." She turned slowly away, gliding on white-socked feet down the long bridgeway from the stage as Yoshi stood watching her, as still as stone.

The ghost stopped halfway down the passageway, her head turned slightly as if she might go back. Yoshi had not moved. In those few moments, the emotional

tension created by the two actors seemed nearly unbearable. The moment stretched outside of time, a distillation of the play's *yugen*, the pure soul of *No*. When the ghost finally resumed her slow glide offstage without looking back, Tomiko felt the release as if invisible strings had been cut away. A sigh drifted through the audience, a muffled whisper of approval and bewilderment.

It didn't matter if the play was successful or not, she realized. She had taken the first step into a future impossible to turn from even if she had wanted to. It was as much her fate as it was her choice. She suddenly understood that Yoshi had finally accepted, if without joy, then with determination, the path on which he too had been forced. Changer of worlds, he was no more the absolute master of his own destiny than she was of hers.

Yoshi stood isolated by the gazing-pillar of the stage, looking out over the darkened audience as if he could see her in the darkness, see into her heart. She knew she would never see Yoshi again. She wept openly, unashamed. ♦

— For Wayne Fowler
and Hanako Nakamura Yamano

About the Authors

It wouldn't be inaccurate to call this our "longevity issue." **F. M. Busby** is one of two writers in this issue who are older than this magazine—quite a feat in itself—and one of three contributors whose first stories were published in magazines that no longer exist.

"Buz" says he has been writing *seriously* for 21 of his 70 years, a period that dates back approximately to the time of his first sale to this magazine ("Of Mice and Otis," March 1972). However, his first SF short-story sale goes all the way back to the Fall 1957 issue of *Future Fiction*, which carried "A Gun for Grandfather." "The Implanted Man" is his eighth appearance in these pages.

Rick Shelley has been selling short stories and novels since 1985, and most of his shorter work has appeared in *Analog*. "Year of the Guns—Part Two" is his second sale to *AMAZING* Stories, following "Blind Sam" (July 1988).

Robert Hodge doesn't have longevity . . . yet . . . but he's headed in

the right direction. "Epitaph for Earth Magic" is his first sale to a professional SF magazine.

In a career that spans more than three decades, **Larry Tritten** has had hundreds of pieces in print. His first SF sale was "West Is West," in the August 1968 issue of *Worlds of If*. "Necessity Is the Mother of Invention . . ." is his first appearance in this magazine.

As the writer-in-residence in the English Department of Arizona State University, **Paul Cook** is eminently qualified to write a story like "The Character Assassin," his first short-story publication in this genre. He's the author of five published fantasy/SF novels, has finished a sixth, and is at work on a seventh.

Bridget McKenna's first published SF story came out in 1986, in Volume 2 of the *Writers of the Future* series. Since then she has sold several more pieces, including "The Defiling" in the January 1991 issue of *AMAZING* Stories. She works as a designer for a software publisher, which

may help to explain how a story like "The Bard Effect" came about.

Mike Curry is the last member of the venerable trio. His first SF story, "Metamorphosis," came out in the August 1953 issue of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. Mike has already earned a reputation among readers of this magazine for his verse; four poems and seven limericks have appeared above his name in the last few years. "Isknif" is his first prose piece for us.

After more than ten years as a professional writer of nonfiction, **Kent Patterson** started turning out SF stories about two years ago. He's already been in print at least three times, with two appearances in *Analog* and now "Divinity School."

This magazine had the privilege of printing the first story **N. Lee Wood** ever sold, "Memories That Dance Like Dust in the Summer Heat" (January 1990). That piece of work ended up on the preliminary Nebula ballot . . . not a bad way to get a career under way. "In the Land of No" is her third SF sale. ♦

Coming in December

Word Salad by Phillip C. Jennings

Is the Prophet insane, or is he haunted by the ghosts of six million martyrs?
There's a way to find out, but maybe the cure will be worse than the disease.

The Long Fall by Ben Bova

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